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“Divine warnings”: Katherine Mansfield

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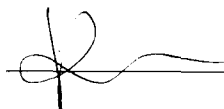
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“My secret belief – the innermost credo by which I live – is that although Life is loathsomely ugly and people are terribly often vile and cruel and base, nevertheless there is something at the back of it all, which if only I were great enough to understand would make everything, everything, indescribably beautiful. One just has glimpses, divine warnings – signs” (*Letters 2: 204-5*)

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Abstract

On her death in January 1923, Katherine Mansfield bequeathed a body of work – both fictional and critical – sufficient to fill several volumes. Although she was not of English origin, she nevertheless counted many celebrated figures of the era as her consorts. Why then, does she remain peripheral to the canon? This dissertation probes the problem of Mansfield's reputation, examining the reasons that she remained (and remains) insufficiently recognised for her contribution to modernist literature. It further proposes that Mansfield's writing displays many of the hallmarks of modernism for which her peers – whose writing succeeded hers by several years – would later become famous.

Introduction

For many years there was no likeness of Katherine Mansfield in the National Portrait Gallery in London. It was gallery policy at the time of her death in 1923 that a portrait could only be hung in the gallery at least ten years after the death of the subject. In 1932, friends and supporters of Mansfield (a group which included Leonard and Virginia Woolf, H. G. Wells, and G. K. Chesterton) offered the gallery a portrait of her, painted in 1918 by Anne Estelle Rice. The trustees of the gallery refused it, and blocked all further efforts to see a likeness of Mansfield hung in the gallery for many years. It was only in 1999, 76 years after her death, that a photograph of Katherine Mansfield finally made its way onto the walls of the gallery (Tomalin 2004: 11).

The reluctance of the trustees to grant her wall-space in the gallery, and thereby recognise her overall contribution to the British cultural establishment, is indicative of a more general attitude towards Mansfield and her work. Although by the time she died she had already started to garner recognition for both her fictional and critical writing, this dissertation will show that many of her contemporaries remained sceptical, and that critics were often cautiously complimentary. It seemed that, despite the visible development of her writing and the accompanying acclaim she was receiving, approval of Mansfield and her work was restrained: praise was often double-edged: American reviewer George Stevens said of Mansfield in 1937 that she was “not the major writer some people once thought. But she was a first-rate minor writer.” (*Book Review Digest* 1937: 659). In his introduction to a collection of essays on Mansfield, Roger Robinson (1994: 1) describes Katherine’s reputation at the time of her death as one of an “attractive but minor writer”. Similarly, D.H. Lawrence, a close friend of both Mansfield and Murry, said of her that “she was *not* a great genius. She had a charming gift, a finely cultivated one. But *not more*.” (Kenner 1988: 159).

Mansfield herself was at times plagued by insecurity and self-doubt. Even as she gained in maturity and experience, she continued to feel frustrated by what she felt to be the slow pace of her progress: in both her journals and letters she frequently berated herself for

not writing enough, or not *well* enough. A common refrain in her journal is “Oh to be a *writer*, a real writer given up to it and to it alone! Oh, I failed today” (*Journal*: 149). Similarly: “My deepest desire is to be a writer, to have a ‘body of work’ done. And there the work is, there the stories wait for me, grow tired, wilt, fade....I must make another effort, I must begin all over again.” (*Journal*: 196). There is profound pathos in this last statement as it appears in a journal entry dated November 1921, two short years before her death. Despite the recognition and respect she had already earned, dissatisfaction with her work and insecurity about her writing ability plagued her till her death.

This dissertation has a dual approach to the problem of Katherine Mansfield’s reputation: firstly it is necessary to examine the factors that contributed to the perception of her as a second-rate writer. On what basis were such claims made? Why was Mansfield not given the recognition she deserved? She remained, to use Robinson’s (1994) expression, on the margin. This dissertation agrees that Mansfield was indeed marginalised, both socially, because of the unconventional company she kept and other unorthodox behaviours, and professionally, because of her choice of medium (the short story) and subject matter (exiles, outsiders and other risqué subjects). It will be suggested that her reputation was built on these factors, rather than on the more appropriate evidence of her writing skill and achievement. Is it possible, as is suggested by Irish critic Frank O’Connor (1963: 128) in his study of the short story, that Mansfield’s work has been obscured by her legend?

Secondly, this dissertation will interrogate what Mansfield achieved in her writing and how these achievements place her indisputably in line with, if not ahead of, some of her more celebrated contemporaries. Mansfield’s development as a writer, formed as it was by her personal history and the cultural climate of war-time Europe, was a development towards an undeniably modernist sensibility. It will be argued that Mansfield features as a crucial figure in 20th century literary culture not only because her concerns were fundamentally modern concerns (marriage, the integrity of the family, sexual identity, psychology) but also because as she matured, her writing started to reveal an undeniably modernist form and style. The latter part of this dissertation will examine a selection of her writing and trace the

development of her writing style, suggesting that while her earlier writing displays the hallmarks of modernism in content and subject matter, her later and more successful work relies on a more subtle and refined technique, in which her modernist leanings are embedded into the form of her writing.

*

Part One: Katherine Mansfield

It has been 100 years since Katherine Mansfield fled from New Zealand to the literary world of London (Alpers 1954: 102). The year was 1908; Mansfield was twenty years old. In the years between 1908 and 1923 she wrote enough to fill five volumes of short stories, 118 stories in total, as well a considerable collection of critical works and reviews (Robinson 1994: 2). Despite this abundance of writing, it can be said that her reputation continues to pale alongside the more prolific Virginia Woolf, for example. The question therefore suspended above the story of Katherine Mansfield, and therefore above this dissertation, is: were the reservations about the value of her work legitimate? The problem of Mansfield's marginalised status will be approached from two angles: the first considers Mansfield's social status, the second considers how her choice of both genre and subject matter may have further alienated her from the central intellectual arena, even at the height of her success.

While she had both admirers and detractors, Mansfield seemed to occupy a peculiar place in the public perception. This dissertation proposes that her position, in both the social and literary scene, was not secure. As one Mansfield biographer Claire Tomalin (1988: 6) observes, Mansfield was “disliked both as a person and as a writer, and also revered as both. Not many people took a stance between these two attitudes, although some – Virginia Woolf was one, D.H. Lawrence another – alternated”. She had uneasy and inconstant friendships with, among others, Lady Ottoline Morrell, the Hon. Dorothy Brett, Frieda Weekley. She attracted the attention of Bertrand Russell, who said that “her talk was marvellous...but when she spoke about people she was envious and dark” (Tomalin 1988: 158). Lytton Strachey found her “very amusing and sufficiently mysterious” (Tomalin 1988: 157). Artist Dora

Carrington took a similarly ambivalent stance, saying of Mansfield that she was “an extraordinary woman, witty and courageous...with the language of a fish-wife in Wapping” (Tomalin 1988: 158).

Mansfield’s status as a colonial – she was born and raised in New Zealand – could also be given as an explanation for the seeming prejudice against her. Hugh Kenner (1988) describes how, in the years leading up to World War One, foreigners like Ezra Pound had relatively easy access to the London network of societies, clubs and country houses but that the years between 1914-1918 changed the criteria for admission: “The unconnected must now play blind-mans-bluff” (Kenner 1988: 81). Mansfield was one such unconnected foreigner. As a woman of ‘other’ origin and, as this dissertation will go on to suggest, questionable reputation, it can be said that Mansfield operated for the most part on the periphery of English society. Robinson claims that Mansfield was “the literary colonial who was never quite accepted in Bloomsbury” (Robinson 1994: 1).

Her early years in London were beset with scandal. As a young woman, she was driven by a voracious appetite for ‘Experience’, through which lay, she believed, the path to self-discovery. In his biography of Mansfield, Anthony Alpers (1954) cites from transcripts from an interview with Margaret Wishart, one of Mansfield’s confidantes in her early days in London. Wishart recalls young Mansfield saying “I must *experience* first – how can I write about things if I don’t experience them?” (Alpers 1954: 111). Her first marriage was at 19, within 8 months of her arrival in England. It followed a whirlwind romance which had lasted only a few months. She explained that she had done it “to see what it felt like” (Alpers 1954: 113). Her mother, having heard of this sudden marriage and the ensuing separation, descended upon London from New Zealand and whisked Mansfield off to the continent in attempt to mitigate some of the scandal. What she did not know was that her daughter was at the same time pregnant with another man’s child (this was miscarried). Mrs Beauchamp returned to New Zealand, leaving Mansfield to ‘get over it’ in a Bavarian convent (Alpers 1954: 122-123). It was not the first romantic liaison to tarnish Mansfield’s reputation, nor was it to be the last.

Mansfield returned to London in January 1910 (Alpers 1954: 126). She brought with her a collection of short stories that led her to an introduction to A.D. Orage, then editor of the popular intellectual weekly, the *New Age*. Her sharp, satirical stories attracted attention, not all of it favourable (Alpers 1954: 134), but, through her involvement with Orage and the *New Age*, Mansfield made her entrance onto the literary social and intellectual scene. Alpers (1954: 128) describes Orage as a ‘literary midwife’, cultivator and patron of aspiring, bright young writers. Although they had parted ways professionally by the end of 1911 when Mansfield switched allegiance to the new intellectual periodical on the block, *Rhythm*, it was through Orage that she was catapulted socially into the ‘in-crowd’ of intellectuals and artists (Berkman 1951: 35-36). Her contributions to the *New Age* had appeared alongside those of Shaw, Chesterton, Wells, Hilaire Belloc, Havelock Ellis and Arnold Bennett (Alpers 1954: 127). Her relationship with literary critic and *Rhythm* editor John Middleton Murry began in 1911 and helped to establish Mansfield further. As well as being a respected intellectual, Murry was also socially established, so was well placed to introduce Mansfield to a social circle that would have otherwise probably been inaccessible to her¹.

In a letter to an editor in 1907, a young Mansfield reportedly described herself as having a “rapacious appetite for everything and principles as light as my purse” (Tomalin 1988: 40). Bold, bright and self-styled avant-garde, she was quick to take – and discard – friends and lovers² and was socially experimental and often controversial. Lytton Strachey called her a “foul-mouthed, brazen-faced broomstick of a creature” (Parkin-Gounelas 1994: 41). To O’Connor (1963: 136) Mansfield was the “brassy little shop-girl of literature”. She was well-known for her skills in impersonation and was a natural performer – her musical training enabled her to supplement her allowance by acting and dancing in a chorus line. Mansfield had courted controversy from a young age; her headmistress said of the teenage Mansfield that she was imaginative “to the point of untruth” and recalled how she made up wild stories of rape and pregnancy (Tomalin 1988: 15). Margaret Wishart said of her earlier

¹ Through Murry, she met Frank Harris, Holbrook Jackson, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska and the D.H. Lawrences (Berkman 1951: 51).

² See, for example, Dunbar 1997: xi

stories that “she *would* revel in sordid detail” (Alpers 1954: 111). During this time Mansfield was filling notebooks with ideas for stories, and would read these out loud to Wishart. Wishart recalls one particular story, written probably in early 1909, in which a dressmaker is seduced, and then lies dying of consumption in a slum tenement in hot summer weather. The description of a pile of rotting bananas lying outside the window was too much for her friend who was offended and pleaded for the removal at least of the bananas, “but she insisted on retaining them, with chuckles of delight” (Alpers 1954: 111). This thrill of the subversive was to become emblematic.

The enigma of Katherine Mansfield was self-consciously created. Her biographers have noted how she adopted different names and personas both socially and professionally³. She used variations of her own name (Katherine, Kathleen, Kassie, Katerina) with different friends to suit her different moods (Tomalin 1988: 5); there is an apparent link between such name changes and her need to try on and play different roles. She also submitted work for publication using pen-names (“The Tiger”, Lili Heron, Boris Petrovsky) as she felt her style was changing (Alpers 1954: 179). Alpers (1954: 134) describes, for example, how she tried out a different spelling of her name when she wrote for the serial publication called *The Open Window*, suggesting that she was trying to shake off the personality she had created for herself in the *New Age*. She was known for her ‘phases’ and her friends often commented on how she frequently seemed to change both personality and appearance. The different faces – or masks – of Katherine became a Mansfield trademark. There was a Russian Mansfield, a Japanese one, a French one. William Orton, a close friend of Mansfield around 1910, said of her “Katharina she called herself, she was being very Russian just then” (Alpers 1954: 136). Alpers called this shape-shifting behaviour a “dangerous experiment in personality” (Alpers 1954: 109). Leonard Woolf described her as having a “mask-like face and she... seemed to be perpetually on her guard against a world which she assumed to be hostile...by nature I think she was gay, cynical, amoral, ribald, witty.” (*Letters* 2: 1). In their critical study of Mansfield,

³ See, for example, Hanson and Gurr 1981: 1-2 and Tomalin 1988: 88

Hanson and Gurr (1981: 2) said of her:

her personality was many-sided, and few of her contemporaries saw exactly the same side. None can have seen her in the round. As her close friend Ida Baker put it, 'She was like a lantern with many windows...each friend had his or her own window...(but) no one could touch the flame – and if anything came too close she would withdraw or close her leaves.

By constantly alienating herself in this way, Mansfield deliberately kept people at arm's length, creating a space between herself and the rest of the world in which she would be free to challenge received assumptions about human relationships and the nature of individual identity. She became renowned for her sharp, satirical tongue and uncompromising – and entertaining – attitudes, both as a person and as a literary type; one can therefore understand how it came to be, as Robinson (1994: 1) suggests, that “her story was better known than her stories”.

The most important personal relationship she would have was not unaffected by these experiments in personality. Her diaries and letters record that her relationship with John Middleton Murry was intense, characterised from the beginning by periods of devotion and contentment, alternating with spells of mistrust, antagonism, and infidelity both real and imagined. Biographers recount how Mansfield was prone to violent mood swings and tempestuous outbursts⁴. Although Mansfield pined for him when they were apart, having him by her side often afforded her little relief⁵.

The pressures facing them were personal as well as financial. They were, during the early years, more often than not penniless⁶. Their fluctuating fortunes and Mansfield's capricious artistic whims meant continuous relocation away from and back to London⁷. Her

⁴ See, for example, Tomalin 1988: 176

⁵ Murry (1928a: vii) himself referred to her “alternations of joy and sorrow”. See also, for example, Berkman 1951: 61 and 119.

⁶ When *Rhythm*'s publisher collapsed, Mansfield and Murry were saddled with the debt, and spent the next few years struggling to keep the publication afloat (Tomalin 1988: 110 and 115).

⁷ In the years between her arrival in London and her death, she moved no fewer than 28 times (Alpers 1954).

deteriorating health, too, was a major contributing factor in their peripatetic lifestyle, as well as to her escalating unhappiness: as she was forced to acknowledge the severity of her illness, Mansfield reportedly spent prolonged episodes abroad in search of warmer or healthier climates.

She had as a contemporary (by virtue of their proximity in age and location) one of the most recognisable voices of the century, Virginia Woolf. Certainly, nearly all of Mansfield's biographers and several of Woolf's biographers have noted the impact that each had on the other. Parallels have been drawn in both the lives and the writing of the two women; notably in *A Public of Two* Angela Smith (1999) writes compellingly about the intense affinity between Woolf and Mansfield: "While both Woolf and Mansfield were literally foreign to each other, in terms of nationality and upbringing, they were also familiar; in recognising the affinity between themselves they were also acknowledging...a kind of doubling" (Smith 1999: 29).

Woolf and Mansfield met in February 1917, although they had known of each other since the previous year (Lee 1997: 388). Mansfield had read Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out*, and was enthusiastic to meet its author. Lytton Strachey spoke of Mansfield to Woolf in 1916 as "decidedly an interesting creature" (Lee 1997: 388); Woolf's response was that she felt that Mansfield "has dogged my steps for three years" (Woolf *Letters*: 107). At this point, Mansfield was still known mostly through her work in the *New Age* and *Rhythm* ("Bliss" was the first of her stories to appear in a journal of serious literary standing, the *English Review*, in 1918). It could be suggested therefore, that she was, at this stage, still known more as a 'personality' than as a writer of any serious credibility. In her initial assessment of Mansfield, and her later attitudes towards her, Woolf can be seen as a representative of a wider group – the English intellectual elite into which Mansfield was never quite granted full admission. As unofficial voice of the moment, her assessment of Mansfield becomes therefore illustrative.

In her descriptions of Mansfield in her letters and journal entries, it seems that Woolf's opinion of Mansfield oscillated between disdain on one hand and admiration on the other, as if she were unable to whole-heartedly accept or condemn her. She wrote to her sister

Vanessa Bell after her first few meetings with Mansfield that “she seems to have gone every sort of hog since she was 17, which is interesting” (Woolf *Letters*: 159). The compliment is barbed with prudish prejudice. In 1922 she admitted in a letter to Lytton Strachey that Mansfield shocked her (Woolf *Letters*: 50). Woolf’s biographer, Lee, suggests that Woolf identified Mansfield with the “underworld... rootless, seedy, metropolitan types... on the make professionally and sexually” (Lee 1997: 390). Perhaps the most revealing of Woolf’s comments on Mansfield came in a letter to Vita Sackville West written in 1931, eight years after Mansfield’s death, in which she reflected upon their relationship:

We never did coalesce, but I was fascinated, and she respectful, only I thought her cheap, and she thought me priggish; and yet we were both compelled to meet simply in order to talk about writing... I was jealous, no doubt, because [her stories] were so praised; but gave up reading them not on that account but because of their cheap, sharp sentimentality, which was all the worse, I thought, because she had, as you say, the zest and the resonance – I mean she could permeate one with her quality; and if one felt this cheap scent in it, it reeked in one’s nostrils...But the fact remains, she had a quality I adored, and needed; I think her sharpness and reality, her having knocked about with prostitutes and so on, whereas I had always been respectable – was the thing I wanted then. (Tomalin 1988: 204).

While she finds the “cheap, sharp sentimentality” of Mansfield’s stories to be distasteful, she finds her “sharpness and reality” appealing; one can but wonder whether the distinction between these supposed polar opposites was as vague to Woolf as it is to this reader. What is clear, however, is that beneath the tangible snobbishness lies a deeper admiration of Mansfield’s work. It is apparent that her reservations about Mansfield were social rather than professional: in a 1921 letter to Mansfield she confesses that her response to “Prelude” was “Damn Katherine! Why can’t I be the only woman who knows how to write?” (Lee 1997: 398).

Smith (1999: 37) argues for an imbalance in the relationship between the two women, highlighting the intensity of Woolf’s feeling for Mansfield: admiration, love and the hatred

that stems from jealousy. She observes that although Woolf's diaries from 1917 refer frequently to Mansfield, Mansfield made scant reference to Woolf in her own journals, and does not seem to have kept any of her letters. Smith (1999: 30) further notes that this disparity in their relationship is however not borne out in the biographies of the two women: nearly all of Mansfield's biographies include a chapter on the relationship between the two, whereas many of Woolf's biographies omit any reference to Mansfield, despite Woolf's own insistence on the significance of her relationship with Mansfield. This lends further support to the argument that Mansfield's reputation has been skewed by biography, and constructed on grounds other than her writing.

The irony of Mansfield's conditional admission into the 'in-crowd' of intellectuals and artists was that the very elements of her personality and lifestyle that undermined her social standing – keeping her on the outside of 'respectable' society – were the same qualities that made her an intriguing character and an emerging talent. This ambivalence towards Mansfield and her insistence on being 'otherwise', both in her own life and in her writing, was typical: this dissertation has thus far shown that attitudes towards Mansfield the person, and reviews of her work, were often a mixture of curiosity and disapproval. Though she counted among her lovers, friends and contemporaries many of whom were later to become icons of the modernist movement, the lasting perception of her is that she remained an outsider. It has thus been argued that by marginalising herself socially, Mansfield may have compromised her professional reputation, by distracting her critics and contemporaries from the truth that she was, in fact, an important modernist writer and innovator.

Dunbar (1997: xi) compares Mansfield to Wilde, whose radicalism was as much a matter of lifestyle and personality as of literary innovation. It has been shown how Mansfield's craving for Experience drove her to deviate from the norm socially; it also enabled her to experiment professionally. She had since her school years harboured an ambition to be a writer (Berkman 1951: 26), hovering as many writers do between prose and poetry. It was only when she produced "Prelude" that she began to realise that her strength lay in short prose fiction. She started reaching out for a new approach to writing, what she tried to

describe in her journal as a “kind of special prose...no novels, no problem stories...nothing that is not simple, open” (*Journal*: 42-43). The name frequently associated with the English short story form is Rudyard Kipling, who, as both Keating (1989) and Hanson and Gurr (1981) attest, built his reputation almost exclusively on this genre, roughly around the same time that Mansfield began to distinguish herself in the same way. As her reputation, and that of the short story genre itself, have grown, however modestly, since her death, it now seems possible to suggest that Mansfield contributed significantly to the development of the short story. Indeed, Hanson and Gurr (1981: 50) have suggested that Mansfield’s influence on the formal direction of the short story is comparable to that achieved by Joyce on the novel.

In *The haunted study: a social history of the English novel, 1875-1914* Keating (1989) describes how, until the turn of the century, the short story was virtually unheard of as a genre. There had been brief *fin-de-siècle* flirtations with the form: in particular, it had, in its early manifestations, appealed to the Aesthetes of the ‘Nineties because, in its ‘fleetingness and fragility’ it was the perfect form to express their melancholy, tired view of life (Keating 1989: 42). Keating (1989: 41) argues that it was not however till after the turn of the century that the short story became a recognisable (and commercially profitable) style of writing; indeed Alpers (1954:295) claims that as late as 1920, the short story still had no status as a literary form in English writing. It soon became necessary to distinguish the short story as a literary form from a story that merely happened to be short. Keating notes that critics around the turn of the century were forced to start recognising that the short story had become more than just a filler of periodical space, and it was this growing appreciation of the form that brought about an important and lasting change in the attitude of British readers and writers (Keating 1989: 41).

For some time there nevertheless persisted the perception that the short story was less worthy than mainstream novel writing. Robinson (1994) describes Mansfield as a writer of “little stories”; George Orwell described her formula as “a pointless little sketch about fundamentally uninteresting people, written in short flat sentences and ending on a vague query” (Kenner 1988: 159). D. H. Lawrence felt that Mansfield was a “short-story writer who

never quite graduated to the big league of the novel” (Robinson 1994: 1), as much an indictment of the form as it was of Mansfield’s relative success with it. By cultivating this “kind of special prose” Mansfield was thus relegated to a lower status than that of the ‘big league’ writers of novels. Her accomplishments were initially considered (are possibly still are, by some) only in the light of what she was able to achieve with this particular form. Alpers recounts a review of *Bliss* by Edward Shanks of the *London Mercury*, who said of Mansfield that she was “one the best living writers of short stories in English, which is not saying much” (Alpers 1954: 300). Although readers and critics therefore seemed to acknowledge Mansfield’s role in cultivating the English short story, she is given limited credit for her contribution to English literature in general, and even less for her contribution to the modernist revolution that was transforming English society all around her.

This dissertation endeavours to show how Mansfield’s achievement was to become a perfect fit of form and content. She experimented with this unique new form to write her own marginalised status into her stories through her presentation of characters and contexts. O’Connor (1963: 20-21) describes the short story genre as the refuge of misplaced souls, often characterised by the “sense of outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society... submerged population groups – tramps, artists, lonely idealists, dreamers and spoiled priests”. For O’Connor then, the relationship between the short story and the marginal is pivotal. This could indeed be said to be true of Mansfield’s skilful experimentation with the genre: many of her stories deal with characters who are in some way isolated, or separated, or alienated: from home, from family, from society, from self. Her early *In a German Pension* stories are all set in Germany, and deal collectively with, among other issues, the sense of alienation that comes with being alone in a foreign country. Other early stories like “The Woman at the Store” and “Millie” deal with the geographical isolation of the New Zealand outback. Increasingly, Mansfield’s characters appear rootless, or alone, or misunderstood and/or unable to communicate: the title figures in “Ole Underwood”, “The Tiredness of Rosabel”, “Ma Parker”, “Miss Brill”, also Ada Moss (“Pictures”) and Miss Smith (“A Cup of Tea”) to name a few.

Tomalin (1988: 201) draws attention to the parallels in the work of Woolf and Mansfield, but finds as a point of distinction their treatment of their characters: of Woolf's characters she says that they "inhabit a world of social, cultural and historical connections. Her houses and landscapes are rich in historical associations too." By contrast, of Mansfield's characters she says that they:

seem to inhabit a void... Without any web of associations or history, Katherine's characters make their appearances boldly, equipped with nothing more than charm or absurdity or pathos, against their settings of railway trains, seaside houses, hotels, parks and far, unlabelled corners of the world (Tomalin 1988: 201).

Tomalin may well have been describing the relative social standing of the two women themselves.

Herself ever-restless in the moment, it was as true for Mansfield as for many of her characters that "places were paradise only so long as they were elsewhere" (Davin 1976: viii) and that it is possible, as Robinson (1994: 4) suggests, that she was most at ease when near the edge, writing about outcasts, exiles, minorities and fringe-dwellers. Response to Mansfield's choice of genre and subject matter may have been ambivalent, but it was, ironically, precisely because she opted to remain on the margin, that she found the space to challenge social and literary conventions in this way. The downside of this strategy was that it reinforced public scepticism about Mansfield's importance as a writer.

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Part Two: Modernist London

In order to fully assess the nature and scope of Mansfield's contribution to the English literary tradition, one must review the cultural territory in which she was trying to stake a claim.

Historical and cultural commentators generally concur that the years leading up to World War One were socially, politically and intellectually turbulent, tinged with the

anticipation of transformation⁸. The major social challenges of the 19th century were the result of rapid industrialisation and urbanisation, the disruption of old class patterns and the rise of capitalist social relations. These spilled over the turn of the century to inform the anxieties of the new era: politics, economics, philosophy, religion, sex, the Empire, women's rights. Alarm bells were ringing in the decline and fall of England, with the degeneracy (both physical and moral) and decadence of the late Victorians and *fin-de-siècle* sub-cultures named as chief culprits. The success of the newly urbanised and industrialised middle class brought about a 'new kind of rich man' (Hynes 1991: 61): vulgar, irresponsible and decadent. With his physical and moral softness, he embodied the spirit of the post-Victorian age. Conceptions of class were altered, and the old lines of division between gentry and peasantry were blurred. The result was an atmosphere of estrangement and anxious uncertainty. From these conditions emerged a revolutionary consciousness, founded on impatience with the old order. It was to be a revolt that would manifest itself across the spectrum, one that would launch a range of social and aesthetic movements, from socialism through to post-impressionism (Hynes 1991).

Keating (1989: 1) describes the years between 1880 and 1914 as an "age of transition", flanked on either side by the Victorians and the Moderns, a period between "distinct phases of creativity". It was nevertheless a vigorous and prolific time for England, socially, politically and aesthetically; cultural commentators generally agree that "virtually everything that is thought of as characteristically modern already existed in England by 1914" (Hynes 1991: 5). Social and aesthetic forces and events had been shaping the modernist sentiment since the turn of the century but Virginia Woolf's famous identification of 1910 as the year that "human character changed" (Woolf 1928: 5) becomes a reference point, the birth of the cultural revolution that we now recognise as modernism.

The literature of this period reflected the insecurity and instability of the new century. Wright (1984: 3) described it as a "literature of crisis...the fracturing or dismantling of personal relations, of social institutions, of civilisation... the distant or imminent threat of cataclysmic disruption of the familiar". In a 1919 letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell, Mansfield

⁸ See, for example, Hynes 1991: 3-53

expressed her sense of the changes in literature taking place around them: “I do believe the time has come for a ‘new word’, but I imagine the new word will not be spoken easily. People have never explored the lovely medium of prose.” (*Letters 1*: 236-7). Murry (1960: 297) said of D. H. Lawrence that he “committed the whole of himself to the search for a new mode of human existence, a new consciousness, a new religion” and this could be a general comment on the voices emerging from this period. This search had no single, organisational principle, and the response was as varied as it was radical. Most operated on principles of conflict and the subversion of the entrenched intellectual architecture. Woolf (1928: 20) recalled: “And so the smashing and the crashing began... all around us, in poems and novels and biographies...the sound of breaking and falling, crashing and destruction. It is the prevailing sound of the Georgian age.” As varied as the responses were, the young thinkers and artists of the day shared a common point of origin: they were unified, if not by their individual agendas, by an enthusiasm for the idea that there were new options for them to lead different kinds of lives, different opportunities for work and marriage for women, the rethinking of class structures, and the role of Art in this brave, new world. Despite their proclaimed resistance to classification (Lee 1997: 262), Woolf and her contemporaries found themselves grouped by their mutual interest in these urgent questions. Most of its so-called members objected at some point to the application of the label ‘the Bloomsbury group’, but in its loosest form it can be used to refer to a group of like-minded friends, all interested in the arts and politics, and living in a specific area of London during a particular time period. Without a specific manifesto or list of criteria for membership, the ‘who’s who’ of Bloomsbury has always been difficult to establish exactly. They numbered among themselves Leonard and Virginia Woolf, Clive and Vanessa Bell, Lytton Strachey, Maynard Keynes, Roger Fry, Ottoline Morrell and Dora Carrington, among others. But, as Lee argues in her biography of Virginia Woolf, there were writers and friends of the group who were nevertheless distinctly *not* Bloomsbury. She significantly names Katherine Mansfield as one such writer (Lee 1997: 263).

Mansfield emerged as a noteworthy writer as England was responding to the changing mood of modern literature. Historical commentators like Keating (1989) and Hynes (1991) have described at length how the relaxation of social manners in the Edwardian age made room for an intensification of various kinds of intellectual and artistic concerns. The impatience with the conservative established order, standing for Respectability, Christian Duty, Patriotism, the sanctity of marriage, and women remaining ‘in their place’, found a natural outlet for expression in the arts. What began as a growing antagonism towards Establishment values, pillared as they were by Victorian inhibition and prudery⁹, developed into the “multiple shocks of modernism” (Kenner 1988: 6). Expressions of modernist subversiveness and anti-establishment rhetoric started to become the driving force of many an artistic expression. Much of the fiction emerging during this period therefore worked to foreground topical issues: the Suffrage movement, sexual identity, survival of the empire.

By the time that Mansfield arrived in London, artistic temperaments were already infected with the presentiments of modernism; the mood was contagious and Katherine, highly sensitive spirit that she was, caught it acutely. By 1909 she was writing for the *New Age*; her first collection, *In a German Pension*, containing stories written in 1909 and bought and published in 1911, received ambivalent reviews but propelled her undoubtedly into the English literary scene (Alpers 1954: 144-145).

Mansfield was bold in her choice of themes – stories like “Je Ne Parle Pas Francais” and “A Married Man’s Story”, for example, tell of child abuse, prostitution, murder, wife beating, sexual identity – and this new atmosphere of permissiveness suited her perfectly. When Murry’s fledgling periodical *Rhythm* was launched in the wake of the Post-Impressionist exhibition in London, its credo was the assertion that “art must be *brutal*” (Alpers 1954: 148). Mansfield’s first story to be printed in the magazine was “The Woman at the Store”, a story of murder and deception set in the backwaters of New Zealand, and hit the note of “brutal art” perfectly. The edition – and Mansfield in particular – was censured: Mansfield and her co-contributors were accused of “running after sensationalism; dancing

⁹ See, for example, Keating 1989: 103

with seals in delirium, dreaming of murderous hags and degenerate children, playing with sadism and devil-worship, gazing at drunken tramps amid daffodils...” (Alpers 1954: 160). Conservatives bemoaned what now seemed a deliberate representation of the coarse, the concrete, the vulgar and the physiological side in human life and passion. Predictably, this new outspokenness was met with resistance. There was reportedly:

dispiriting hostility accorded to any work that tried to deal frankly with sexuality or the family. Formal experimentation was liable to be treated with similar abuse and insensitivity. The most innovative novelists of the period – Meredith, James, Conrad, Joyce, Lawrence – all lived creative lives which were isolated, embattled and in many respects consciously opposed to the main social developments of their age, and dominated by an obsessive concern to redefine the long traditions of fiction. (Keating 1989: 179)

The interrogation and overturning of conventions in behaviour became the interrogation and overturning of conventions in art. Keating (1989: 168) describes how “the drive towards greater individual freedom...gave way to...the remarkable experimentation of the next decade”. Edward Carpenter in 1910 wrote in the *New Age* that there was a need for “relief from the stifling atmosphere of the drawing room” (Tomalin 1988: 50), referring presumably to drawing rooms both fictional and real. Novelists began challenging conventions that governed what was and was not permissible in fiction. Despite the differences in medium or genre, and preoccupation, they were articulating their sense of the rupture from the artistic conventions of the day. Mansfield famously described her own personal experience of this rupture as a “shaking free” (*Letters* 2: 160); it was a freedom from, among other things, the pressures of realism and its obligations to social and external detail and exactness. Early modernist fiction sought to represent, through increasingly liberated narrative forms, an increasingly liberated society. From novelist after novelist there came demands to break away from Victorian restrictions on conventions, both social and literary. Modern art and literature in the new century began more and more to express anti-

Victorian objections to English realism and idealism; it was a shift away from objective representation towards style, technique and spatial form in pursuit of a deeper penetration of life. In their influential anthology *Modernism, 1890-1930*, Bradbury and McFarlane (1978) describe the highly aesthetic self-consciousness of modernist artists and writers who seemed to be working to:

objectify the subjective, to make audible or perceptible the mind's inaudible conversations, to halt the flow, to irrationalise the rational, to defamiliarise and dehumanise the expected, to conventionalise the extraordinary and the eccentric, to define the psychopathology of everyday life, to intellectualise the emotional, to secularise the spiritual, to see space as a function of time, mass as a form of energy and uncertainty as the only certain thing. (Bradbury and McFarlane 1978: 48).

Kenner relates an editorial comment about London *circa* 1909: "The revolutionary spirit, both literary and political, was quickening year by year. At the same time, the late-Victorian structure of clubs, societies, literary hostesses, country houses, bookshops and serious journals was still in place, offering many opportunities to an ambitious young writer" (Kenner 1988: 81). Significantly, it was in these clubs, societies and literary journals that the soon-to-be modernist icons like Woolf, Joyce and Lawrence caught that revolutionary spirit. Woolf had started drawing an income for her reviews as early as 1905 (Lee 1997: 215) and her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, was published in 1915 (Lee 1997: 327). Joyce, the same age as Woolf, was in the process of writing his three most important works: *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* was serialised in the *Egoist* in 1914-15, the earliest chapters dating back to 1909; the stories that became *Dubliners* started to appear in print in 1914, and *Ulysses* is said to have been well underway by 1914 (Keating 1989: 96). Lawrence's *Son's and Lovers* was published in 1913, *The Rainbow* in 1915 and *Women in Love* in 1920 (Kinkead-Weekes 1996: xxiv-xxxvi).

It can therefore be argued that in responding likewise to the changing intellectual landscape around her, Mansfield's emerging voice can – and should – be considered

alongside those of her more celebrated contemporaries. The reality of Mansfield's reputation, as has been argued thus far, was that it was not.

Of significance, however, for the case of Katherine Mansfield's reputation is the recognition that not only was Mansfield *of* her generation, as is argued above, she was more significantly *ahead* of them. A glance at the chronology of the individual successes of Mansfield, Woolf and Joyce, for example, is revealing: at the time of Mansfield's death in 1923, Woolf was yet to produce the works for which she was to become famous. When Mansfield's *Bliss and Other Stories* came out to great acclaim in December 1920, Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* was seven years away from its appearance in 1927 (Dunbar 1997: xv) and *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown* was four years away (1924) from publication (Stevenson 1992: 3). Mansfield's short stories therefore preceded Woolf's major critical and fictional works by several years. That landmark of literary modernism, Joyce's *Ulysses*, was only to make its dramatic appearance a year later in 1922 (Stevenson 1992: 2). Posthumous publication of much of Mansfield's work meant that this chronological lag went unrecognised, and her voice was, at best, labelled as 'one of many'. The truth was rather that Mansfield was ahead of her time, and ahead of her contemporaries in challenging post-Victorian literary conventions and introducing the modernist themes for which novelists such as Woolf and Joyce would become famous. Why, then, has the perception that Mansfield was a 'second-rate writer' persisted?

In *Modernist fiction: An introduction* critic Randall Stevenson (1992: 1-15) reviews R.A. Scott-James' interrogation of the acclaim so universally awarded to writers of the modernist set. Scott-James argues that although it is generally accepted that modernist fiction at its height refers to novels published in the 1920s by the likes of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence, the disposition for change and transformation in the novel originated much earlier. He argues that the "roots of transformation in modernist writing need to be considered as reaching back at least to the fiction of Henry James...and Joseph Conrad" (Stevenson 1992: 2). He goes on to argue that the techniques for which modernist writers became famous in the 1920s were evident as early as before the turn of the century, for example, departure from the serial, chronological construction of story-telling, the stream of

consciousness technique often held to be the principal innovation and distinguishing achievement of modernist fiction (Stevenson 1992: 5). Scott-James' allegation lends support to this dissertation's claim that Mansfield has been overshadowed by the reputation of writers whose offerings succeeded hers and has been insufficiently recognised for her contribution to literary modernism.

Similarly, in her essay "Middle of the Note: Katherine Mansfield's 'Glimpses'", critic Sarah Sandley (1994: 89) aligns herself with the growing group of literary critics who recognise the parallels, both formal and thematic, between the writing of Virginia Woolf and that of Katherine Mansfield. More specifically, Sandley forms part of a smaller group who suggest that although Woolf is universally heralded as a chief pioneer of literary modernism, it was in fact Mansfield whose literary experiments and innovations contributed more to the transformation of modernist literature than is generally acknowledged today. Another Mansfield critic, Saralyn Daly (1965: 24) concurs, observing that when Woolf's stories began to appear, they were "very much in the Mansfield manner, marked by the same personal immediacy of view, the same acute perception of detail".

It has thus far been argued that to a large extent Mansfield remains unacknowledged for her contribution to the English canon, and reasons (that she was marginalised for being socially and professionally unconventional) have been suggested for this oversight. The remainder of this dissertation will examine a selection of her work, and show how, despite the allegedly limited nature of her success, she was more significant a voice than she is often given credit for.

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Part Three: Six Mansfield themes

It has thus far been argued that, despite the lingering ambivalence towards Mansfield's work, Mansfield can nevertheless be grouped with her modernist contemporaries on the basis of a shared interest in what Stevenson (1992: 3) called "fashionable, newfangled ideas, the sort of

innovation that betrayed the more solid values of tradition". It will further be shown that, more importantly, she distinguished herself from them significantly. It will be argued that while her preoccupation with "fashionable, newfangled ideas" aligned her initially with her contemporaries, it was when she started to focus less on the blatant expression of these ideas, and more on the *form* or *technique* of her writing, that she marked herself out as a pioneer. Although there is a growing body of contemporary criticism that is now starting to acknowledge her contribution, for many years both Mansfield and her work remained underestimated.

In order to chart Mansfield's progression, this dissertation will identify and discuss six modernist themes or stylistic devices that Mansfield realised or employed in her work. These are given as reasons that Mansfield should not be overlooked as an important modernist writer and innovator. The first three are thematic in that they are represented in the *content* of her stories; that is, like many of her peers, she engaged directly with the modern topics *du jour* in her stories. These first three themes have been identified as: the new focus on, and changing role of, the family; gender and the 'women' issue; and the idea that as individuals we are isolated by the subjective nature of our experiences. The remaining three are seen in her *technique* so can be more accurately described as narrative devices. These devices are identified as her manipulation of a stable narrative voice; her reliance on the layering of images, specifically light and nature, to create atmosphere and impart meaning; and her development of what came to be called the 'glimpse' moment. Each of these will be elaborated on below.

Such division of Mansfield's work into these six categories may well seem contrived or even arbitrary, as such divisions often are. They have been singled out here in order to provide anchor-points in her stories, around which discussion can take place, and are not intended to reduce the scope of her success. It is important to note that these ideas are merely six of many possible focal points in Mansfield's writing. The following section presents a general discussion of these six themes or techniques; thereafter follows a closer look at a few specific stories in which these themes or techniques are realised.

*

Mansfield returned frequently to the home and to family relationships in her stories to explore the complexity of human interaction. Woolf (1928: 5) explained in her polemic on modernist methodology, *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown*, that: “all human relations have shifted – those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics and literature.” It may also be that the converse is true: the change in religion, conduct, politics and literature may themselves bring about the change in human relations. Keating (1989: 161) argues that for the mid-Victorian novelist, marriage, a family and home, were ideals to strive for, rewards paid for surviving a perilous world, an attained condition of stability. So, if it can be said that mid-Victorian fiction had supported the ideal of hearth and home in principle, it can be said of the fiction emerging in the new century that it deconstructed those ideals: for the modernist novelist, marriage, family and home were more likely to become symbols of repression (Keating 1989: 161). Keating’s considered account of this period describes the growing involvement of the State with family life. Legislation on education, women’s rights, divorce, employment and social welfare, all helped to modify the autonomy of the family (Keating 1989: 153). The insecurity brought about by the undermining of the authority of the father or husband over his wife, sons and daughters provided novelists with an wealth of new material. If, as Keating suggests, novelists were no longer interested in man as “voter, town councillor or vestryman”, they remained fascinated by him as “lover, husband, father, friend” (Keating 1989: 157).

Mansfield also had a particular predilection for writing about children. In her early work she wrote mostly about children, or included in her stories fantastical, fairytale elements, for example, “Sun and Moon”, “See-saw”, “Sixpence”, and “A Doll’s House”. It will be shown how the changing face of the English cultural psyche contributed to the growing autonomy of the individual; attitudes towards children were also altered¹⁰.

¹⁰ In 1880 education was made compulsory for children between the ages of five and ten (Keating 1989: 153)

Relationships between parents and children became increasingly fraught as the general atmosphere of rebelliousness was fuelled by the changes taking place in both politics and fiction. The representation of children in modernist fiction was altered accordingly: Keating (1989: 220) notes that children were suddenly allowed to be themselves in fiction, no longer praised for being pious, industrious and well-mannered, the admired child was more likely to be seen as imaginative, inventive, self reliant and constantly in trouble. Mansfield herself believed of her early work that her 'child stories' were the most authentic; to Murry in 1918 she said "My serious stories won't ever bring me anything but my 'child' stories ought to" (Daly 1965: 78).

The second theme identified as a key feature of Mansfield's stories is what came to be known as 'the women issue'. A large number of Mansfield's stories concern themselves visibly with issues of marriage and motherhood. Certainly there have been efforts to read Mansfield as a feminist writer. For example, in the article "Subverting surface and doubling irony: Subtexts of Mansfield's 'Revelations' and Others", Dan Shen (2006: 191-209), offers a feminist reading of several of Mansfield's stories. Shen (2006: 207) argues that the "interrogation of or protest against masculinist oppression and distortion of women forms a most significant subtext of many of Mansfield's stories". It is, however, important to note that Mansfield never considered herself a feminist and was more than once scornful of, for example, the Suffragette movement¹¹. Her insistence she was a "writer first, and a woman after" (Alpers 1980: 323) is well-known. Parkin-Gounelas (1994: 36), in her essay "Katherine Mansfield Reading Other Women: The Personality of the Text", reminds readers that Mansfield made no overt commitment to either female solidarity or to a tradition of women's writing. In an early story, "A Truthful Adventure", the female protagonist, Katherine, runs into an old friend from New Zealand while visiting Bruges. When her friend says "We're frightfully keen on the Suffrage, you know" and her husband asks Katherine "Are you with us?", Katherine shakes her head, and the husband narrows his eyes at her. Some of

¹¹ In a letter to Garnet Trowell in 1908 Mansfield mocked a Suffragette meeting (Parkin-Gounelas 1994: 37).

Mansfield's earlier, more vitriolic stories do however blatantly represent marriage as a financial and sexual transaction which is both degrading and restricting for women; the early *In a German Pension* stories certainly: "At Lehmann's", "Frau Brechenmacher Attends a Wedding", "The Mating of Gwendolen". As she matured she developed a lighter touch so stories like "Marriage à la Mode", "Prelude", "At the Bay", "A Married Man's Story" deal with these issues with more subtlety. Mansfield's friendship with arch-feminist Beatrice Hastings, described by Alpers as Orage's lieutenant (Alpers 1954: 128), has often been given as the impetus for these stories. When the two women met in 1910 Hastings was 30 years old, and already known as an impassioned feminist. Her polemics detailed, among other topics, the horrors of childbirth, the sexual subjection of women to their husbands and the absurdity of the universities' refusal to grant degrees to women (Tomalin 1988: 85). It seems therefore unlikely to be mere coincidence that two of Katherine's stories to appear in the *New Age* around the time of their meeting, dealt specifically with the horrors of childbirth ("At Lehmann's") and marriage ("Frau Brechenmacher Attends a Wedding") respectively. Although she denied conscious allegiance to any feminist cause, it seems, as Tomalin suggests in her biography, very likely that Mansfield was, for some time, writing under Hastings' influence. Alpers (1954: 134) too notes that "Katherine was in Mrs Hastings' power when she wrote 'At Lehmann's'".

Writers were also beginning to respond to the relative liberalising of sexual attitudes after the Victorian period. In her critical study of the Mansfield oeuvre, Pamela Dunbar (1997: ix) suggests that Mansfield was among the first of the post-Victorians to challenge received taboos on recording sexual experience. Certainly, stories like "Prelude" and "Bliss" reveal her interest in the nature of desire and female sexuality. She challenges traditional notions of patriarchy by presenting her male characters as ineffectual or slightly ridiculous: Raoul Duquette in "Je ne Parle pas Francais", Reginald Peacock in "Mr Reginald Peacock's Day", Bobby Kane in "Marriage à la Mode", Eddie Warren in "Bliss", are all sensitive and articulate, but also effeminate. On the other hand, her presentation of characters like Stanley Burnell in "Prelude" and "At the Bay", Harry Young in "Bliss" and Mr Hammond in "The

Stranger” as vital and macho, is equally critical. Her enquiries into sexual identity and her deconstruction of gender roles mark her out as an early modernist voice. However guided Mansfield’s introduction to these issues may have been by Hastings, and although blatant feminist polemic would soon become distasteful to her, she nevertheless continued to explore the modernist concerns about the family, about women’s rights and sexuality. Although Woolf features famously in the canon for her energetic considerations of the implications of the historical exclusion of women from education and economic independence, again, the chronology is revealing: Woolf’s two feminist tracts, *A Room of One’s Own* and *Three Guineas* were published in 1929 and 1938 respectively (Lee 1997: 342-343). Mansfield’s consideration of these issues appear in her work years prior to this, and can therefore be viewed as precursors to the efforts of later, celebrated pioneer feminists like Virginia Woolf.

The third theme to be identified is Mansfield’s interest in the subjectivity of man’s experience of the world. She wrote often in her journals and letters of her sense of man’s tragic isolation in a hostile universe. She was interested in both the impact of physical isolation on the human consciousness (the effect of loneliness) as well as the idea that man exists at an ontological remove from his fellow-man. In a letter to Ottoline Morrell in 1918 she despairs:

...the great curse which is upon life – the curse of loneliness – I am quite certain that it is all wrong to live isolated and shut away as we do – never exchanging and renewing and giving AND receiving – there ought to be something fine and gay that tossed about among us – and kept ever so thrillingly in the air, as it were, and never let fall – a spirit. But where is it, and who wants it? ...I am in despair (*Letters 1*: 177).

The idea that as individuals we are trapped in our own subjectivity is a vein that runs increasingly through her stories. Stories like “Miss Brill”, “Bliss”, “A Dill Pickle” and “Pictures”, deal with characters who try to reach out for connection with other characters, and, for the most part, fail. Mansfield repeatedly exposes the gulfs and barriers that exist between her characters, which make real communication and understanding problematic, if

not impossible. Husband and wife are revealed to be worlds apart; mothers and daughters become like strangers to each other. Life is for her a painfully subjective experience: all of her writing – her stories, letters, journals – can be viewed as attempts to pin down and frame her own very subjective experiences of, for example, the delight she takes in watching a sailboat cross a blue bay, or the tenderness she feels for her pet cat. She finds such subjectivity, at times, to be a liberating experience: “one’s own secret private life – what a queer, positive thing it is. Nobody knows where you are – nobody has the remotest idea *who* you are, even” (*Letters I*: 234). At other times, she despairs: “Oh why is the world so ugly...Why do people hide and withdraw and suspect?” (*Letters I*: 218).

Mansfield’s understanding of identity as a multifaceted construct marked her out as a modernist. Along with the other modernist writers of her time, she boldly challenged established theories about the stable, unitary nature of individual identity. In an essay entitled “The novel”, Alan Friedman (1972: 438) describes how Lawrence too admitted his fascination with the part of the human self that was “non-human...a region of the psyche which functioned apart from the moral, consistent, stable, individual ego, a level of character at which the individual is unrecognisable”.

Mansfield was introduced at an early age to the early European Impressionists (Alpers 1954: 63) and O’Sullivan (1985: xiii) suggests that she was possibly impressed by Pater’s theory of:

the thick wall of impersonality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that we can only conjecture to be without. Every one of these impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of world.

Distrust of the changes taking place in British society had started to drive novelists increasingly into themselves. The move from the public arena into a much more private,

individual space was being confirmed. The growing interest in the study of psychology¹² promoted a new kind of emphasis placed by novelists on the minute analysis of individual and collective consciousness (Keating 1989: 120). The introduction of free indirect discourse – the transcription of unspoken thoughts – has long and widely been attributed to writers like Joyce and Woolf. More lenient critics may include Lawrence’s earlier efforts: Friedman, for example, says of Lawrence in *The Rainbow* that “before James Joyce and by a different avenue, Lawrence attempted a direct literary rendering of his characters’ unconscious.” (Friedman 1972: 437). This essay proposes the inclusion of Mansfield into this group of literary pioneers: however much one might agree with Friedman that Joyce’s method was to “pulverise verbal consciousness in order to render preconscious and unconscious material” (Friedman 1972: 437), one could suggest the same for Mansfield’s method. Yet, as Sandley (1994: 89) argues, it is Joyce and Woolf who are credited with the experimental development of free indirect discourse. One of the few critics to do so, Robinson (1994: 5) acknowledges that as early as 1915, Mansfield was working to undermine the existing literary tradition by the capturing “the myriad impressions of human memory and emotions, the moments of impulse and transition rather than the well-rounded narrative episode”.

As early as 1908, with “The Tiredness of Rosabel”, Mansfield was moving away from the conventionally progressive narrative, and focusing instead on the thoughts and sense-impressions of her characters. In “The Tiredness of Rosabel” Mansfield employs a narrative voice that remains almost entirely within Rosabel’s consciousness. Daly (1965: 24) notes this as an astonishing departure for a young writer like Mansfield, who had not yet been exposed to such deviations from English storytelling traditions as were to become almost commonplace in the next few years. Readers who again bear the chronology of these writers in mind would be hard-pressed to deny that Mansfield’s unique brand of interior monologue predates the use of those narrative devices by other modernist writers.

¹² Keating (1989: 122) notes that the *New Age* began paying attention to Freud, with his focus on the individual consciousness, in 1912.

Mansfield's growing interest in the subjectivity of human experience and how such subjectivity essentially isolates people from each other lead her to question the reliability of a stable narrative voice. The unreliable narrator was to become a characteristic of modern fiction but is identified here as the fourth distinguishing feature of Mansfield's stories. The destabilisation of the narrative voice represented a decisive step away from the relative stability of Victorian fiction, and from realism with its secure omniscience. It was symptomatic of the scepticism of the day, which installed an epistemological doubt about how truthfully the world can be known or communicated through an individual's idiosyncratic view of it. If, as Lawrence claimed, "the individual is unrecognisable", by dispensing with a narrative voice and exploiting a series of evasions of a stable subject position, modernist fiction becomes, as Parkin-Gounelas (1994: 44) says of Mansfield's work, "perversely unknowable". Certainly, it could be argued that one of the hallmarks of Mansfield's stories is the way she reveals the gulfs between characters by contrasting their attitudes and ideas through an often seamless shift between perspectives. It was here, in the smooth glides from the perspective of one character to the next, that she was becoming master of her art. It is therefore proposed, as Daly (1965: 73) observes, that the "involvement of the reader in multiple viewpoints, so easily overlapped that it is at times difficult in the later stories to specify when the change occurred, is Katherine Mansfield's most influential contribution to the modern short story".

This dissertation describes how Mansfield started moving away from traditional conceptions of writing, specifically from conventional narrative prose. In order to achieve this, she relied more on what is here argued to be a fifth characteristic feature of her writing: her use of images of nature and light. Increasingly, as Mansfield dispensed with the narrator she allowed networks of images to speak for themselves. She was moving towards a more oblique approach, and her stories began to rely increasingly on the accumulation of layered images or motifs to impart meaning. This reliance on the evocative impact of the image was to become definitive. Critics speak often of the physical surface of her work and its tone, colour and texture. Hanson and Gurr (1981: 24), for example, describe how she is commonly

praised for her exquisite rendering of impressions of the natural world: “There is a string of nouns – flash, colour, sparkle, glow – by means of which her critics have tried to convey the effect her work has had on them.”

In her journals she described feeling driven towards a new kind of writing, a kind of “special prose”, which in trying to articulate, she likened to poetry. She felt that she was “trembling on the brink of poetry. The almond tree, the birds, the little wood where you are, the flowers which you do not see, the open window out of which I lean” (*Journal*: 42). Although she soon realised that she was more prose-writer than poet, she retained the notion of an imagistic style of writing. It was a shift that proved to be the making of her: it was in the immediacy of those small, detailed observations, the freeze-frame moments, that she achieved the paradoxical balance between razor-sharp precision and subtlety.

This dissertation proposes that as she developed this imagistic style, Mansfield returned frequently to two central motifs: light and nature. Mansfield’s interest in lighting would become characteristic. O’Sullivan (1985: xi-xii) described the technique: “Such stories play a beam over life, to catch at fragments of personality and the glancing revelations of a moment...(it would be) a matter of lighting rather than event.” Of her first novel, *The Aloe*, she wrote to Murry: “I expect you will think I am a dotty when you read it...I suddenly discovered...exactly what I want my novel to be...people rather dark and seen strangely as they move in the sharp light and shadow; and I want bright shivering lights in it, and the sound of water” (*Letters 1*: 18).

Her stories also frequently features powerful images of nature – plants and animals and weather – which are not introduced or placed incidentally, but rather carry specific weight and purpose. Not unlike Eliot’s objective correlative, which denotes an external symbol or correlate for a private emotion, it could be argued that these motifs function as *symbols* of abstract states of consciousness. Hanson and Gurr (1981: 21) in particular argue that Mansfield’s debt to Symbolism has been insufficiently recognised. Certainly her work could be said to reflect the Symbolist ideal that in literature an abstract state of mind or feeling should be *evoked*, not described. However, to read each narrative glimpse or layered image as

a series of symbols is surely reductive and tramples clumsily over the delicate atmosphere of those moments. It was instead a fusing of external detail and a character's inner life, intended to provide insight into thoughts and feelings the character may not consciously acknowledge. Sandley (1994) explains how Mansfield's use of this technique assists in building structure and form so that her stories lead to the all-important climax without the need for conventional crisis and resolution.

Her focus was sharpening; in a 1917 letter to friend, Koteliansky, she wrote of the "infinite delight and value in *detail* – not for the sake of detail but for the life *in* the life of it" (*Letters I*: 28). Mansfield's own experience of the "delight and value in detail" she expressed as 'glimpses'. In 1920 she wrote in her journal: "And yet one has these 'glimpses'...The waves, as I drove home this afternoon, and the high foam, how it was suspended in the air before it fell...What is it that happens in that moment of suspension? It is timeless. In that moment the whole life of the soul is contained" (*Journal*: 148). Sandley (1994) uses Mansfield's own word 'glimpse' to refer to these moments of enhanced inner significance, on which so many of her stories are centred¹³. Put differently, the 'glimpse' is the most intense rendering of atmosphere. Parallels with the Joycean epiphany were inevitable: O'Sullivan (1985: xi) argues that these moments of illumination place Mansfield "squarely in that tradition, running from Wordsworth's 'spots of time' to Joyce's 'epiphanies', where the writer's emphasis attends to the value of illuminating and singular moments, to pattern rather than continuity." Sandley (1994: 71) however differentiates between Mansfield's glimpse, and the epiphany. She argues that the term 'epiphany', unveiled in the *Stephen Hero* manuscripts in 1944, has been retrospectively applied to a variety of moments in modernist fiction but that Mansfield uses these climactic moments differently from other modernist writers. Mansfield uses such moments to bring central themes to a climax and to express a wide variety of experiences, from intense ecstasy to acute nihilistic suffering.

The six themes identified above provide compelling evidence of Mansfield's right to a seat in the modernist canon. It was a seat that she was never invited to fill. If we allow that the first three themes discussed above – the role of the family, debates around gendered identity, and the interiority of the human psyche – can be read as the articulated concerns of the emerging modernists, then it can be said that by writing overtly about these topics Mansfield was *typically* modernist. She was not alone in her handling of these issues: it has already been shown that literature emerging during this period was becoming more and more representative of such topical concerns. Michael Bell, in his essay "Introduction: modern movements in literature", describes the early writers like Arnold Bennett, H.G. Wells and Bernard Shaw as being "worried publicly and explicitly about democracy, technology, urbanisation, the emancipation of women and all the other general questions that constitute the proper themes of the historian." (Bell 1980: 80). Certainly nearly all of Woolf's later novels deal with family life. This dissertation argues for an acknowledgement of Mansfield's commitment to these issues, and proposes that in her handling of them, she can and should be readily identified as an early modernist writer.

However, it can be argued that only a superficial engagement with Mansfield's work would allow such a limited assessment of her success. As Mansfield was growing into her own talent, as well as responding to the pressures of the intellectual climate around her, she began to introduce the last three stylistic devices into her work: the undermining of the stable narrative voice, her use of images, specifically the motifs of light and nature, to represent abstract states of consciousness and, importantly, Mansfield's development of the 'glimpse' moment. The distinction between the two groups is therefore better viewed as a development over time. It is interesting to note that Mansfield's journey can also be said to mirror the swivelling focus from the public to the private domain already mentioned: her concerns were initially public concerns – very much the modernist topics – but as she moved into her own personal space her concerns became deeply individual.

¹³ Sandley (1994) counts at least 17 stories and fragments as illustrative of this technique.

That is not to say, however, that one can cleanly separate Mansfield's work according to these two groupings. Few writers develop along such a clearly traceable path and it is only their critics who retrospectively try impose a identifiably linear, chronological progression upon their work. One cannot therefore simply argue that Mansfield's earlier stories display all the signs of the first three themes, while her later stories represent her use of the stylistic devices listed in the second grouping. The inevitable reality of Mansfield's work is that many of her stories are revealing of all six trends, some to a lesser or greater extent. The stories dealt with below are such stories, and will be considered in light of the six focal points identified above, and the extent to which these are revealed in each story.

Another point worth considering about the two groupings is that the social and political nature of the first three themes meant that they leant themselves to representation in *content*: the characters and scenarios in Mansfield's stories nearly always invite a consideration of the relationship between family members and between men and women, and often explore the problem of authentic communication and connection between characters. The second grouping contains stylistic devices that were to become, it is argued here, hallmarks of Mansfield's writing. The analysis of her stories below will show how Mansfield began to move away from a transparent interrogation of modernist topics, as revealed in an emphasis on plot progression or character description. She began to work rather towards a more oblique approach: she strove to reveal, rather than analyse or explain, and began to focus more instead on surface texture and technique. It is here that Mansfield writes at her finest.

The stories to be discussed below have been selected from the range of her published collections: "Germans at Meat" (1910) appeared in Mansfield's first published collection *In a German Pension*; *The Aloe* (1915) was published as a short book and is compared closely with its revision, a short story called "Prelude" (1917) that appeared in *Bliss and Other Stories*; "Psychology" (1919) and "Bliss" (1918) were also published in *Bliss and Other Stories*; "Miss Brill" (1920) appeared in *The Garden-Party and Other Stories* and the unfinished "A Married Man's Story" (started in 1921) appeared posthumously in *The Dove's*

Nest and Other Stories. Not only does this selection span the years of Mansfield's writing career, and therefore could be said to chart the development of her writing style, the stories selected also reveal that style to be increasingly explorative of the themes and techniques that interested the writer, thereby illustrating Mansfield's own personal growth. Although the seven stories selected are but a sample from the Mansfield oeuvre, they offer compelling support to the argument that Mansfield was indeed a verifiably modern voice but that, for the reasons outlined above, was underestimated and overlooked for her contribution.

*

Part Four: Short stories

In a German Pension was Mansfield's first published collection. It was published in 1911, when she was 21 years old (*Collected Stories*: 579)¹⁴. The stories are a series of sketches, told from the first-person perspective of a young English woman staying in a Bavarian boarding house. The stories – and their satirical tone – draw from Mansfield's own unhappy experiences in a Bavarian boarding house. Despite its considerable success – it ran into three editions – later Mansfield believed them to be “immature...positively juvenile ... (because) it's not what I mean; it's a lie” (*Collected Stories*: 580). She tried to prevent Murry from reissuing the edition after the success of *Bliss* in 1918 (*Collected Stories*: 580). These stories do however present the young Mansfield as an emerging modernist voice, reflecting, with what was then a characteristically satirical approach, upon issues of marriage, sexuality, class and cultural superiority.

One of the first – and possibly more successful – stories in the collection, is “Germans at Meat”, an amusing sketch that highlights the national tension between Germany and England, which, in the years leading up to 1914, would have been accumulating. Mansfield transparently foregrounds issues of cultural superiority: the English narrator

¹⁴ In the edition used in this dissertation, *The Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield*, editor Stephen Arkin cites Murry in the headnotes. These references point to the citation by Murry in the headnote.

interacts with the other German guests at mealtimes and the humour arises out of the insinuated argument over the relative vulgarity of each nation: the quantities of food consumed, the size of families, the tendency to be indiscrete about personal information with strangers, and the state of marriage in each country all figuring in their conversations as markers of cultural superiority. When Herr Hoffman recounts the quantities of food he consumed for breakfast when he was staying in England, Fraulein Stiegelauer asks, wide-eyed, “Do they really eat so much?”. The English narrator feels attacked: “I felt I was bearing the burden of my nation’s preposterous breakfast” (*GAM*: 581)¹⁵. The young Mansfield presents her young narrator with humour: she feels acutely the vulgarity of the German conversation: she is offended by their obsession with eating, and discussing the indelicacies of their illnesses and bodily functions; the Widow picks her teeth with her hairpin, while Fraulein Steigelaue discusses her “overbody washing”. Twice the offended narrator feels compelled to interject, to prevent them from sharing too much information. The Traveller from North Germany says he can no longer stomach sauerkraut: “I have eaten so much of it that I cannot retain it. I am immediately forced to –” “A beautiful day,” I cried. The widow talks about having had nine children ““Fine healthy babies – though after the first one was born I had to –” ‘How *wonderful!*’ I cried” (*GAM*: 582).

Mansfield had been living in England for less than a year at the time of this story’s writing but had clearly already absorbed some of the patriotic concern over the state and strength of the British Empire, and the growing anxiety about England’s ability to defend herself against attack. She says of Herr Rat that “he fixed his cold blue eyes upon me with an expression which suggested a thousand premeditated invasions” (*GAM*: 582) and the following repartee is equally revealing of this anxiety:

Said the Traveller: ‘I suppose you are frightened of an invasion, too, eh? Oh, that’s good...’ ... I sat upright, ‘I assure you we are not afraid’. ‘Well, then, you ought to be’
said the Herr Rat. ‘You have got no army at all – a few little boys with their veins full

¹⁵ All page references to the stories are taken from *The Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield*. 2006 Wordsworth Editions Limited.

of nicotine poisoning.’ ‘Don’t be afraid’ Herr Hoffman said, ‘We don’t want England. If we did we would have had her long ago. We really do not want you.’ (*GAM*: 583)

In addition to the cultural clash between the narrator on the one side and the other German guests on the other, as representatives of their respective countries, “Germans at Meat” also reveals the young Mansfield’s growing interest in the family, and in the marriage question. Mansfield’s sardonic edge has her German characters espousing the views that she herself, along with other modernist writers and thinkers of the moment, was perhaps beginning to question: “‘Germany’ boomed the Traveller ‘is the home of the Family;’” and the Widow, mother of nine children, chides: “But you never have large families in England now; I suppose you are too busy with your suffragetting.” (*GAM*: 582). Mansfield’s relationship with Beatrice Hastings during this time has already been discussed, and the influence of the latter over the former is evident here. The German guests challenge the narrator on the state of marriage in England. The closing conversation reveals a group sense of disapproval at the narrator’s admission that she does not know what her husband’s favourite meat is. The Widow comments: “No wonder there is a repetition in England of that dreadful state of things in Paris... How can a woman expect to keep her husband if she does not know his favourite food after three years?” (*GAM*: 584).

In Herr Rat Mansfield also introduced what was to become something of a stock character: an abundantly male figure of large appetites and often patronising opinions. Daly (1965: 21) calls this stock figure the “overbearing businessman father”. (That the narrator occasionally refers to him as *the* Herr Rat is a hint towards a play on names that was to become typical.) Herr Rat’s chauvinist views, for example, “When one is not married it is necessary (to know how to cook)” and “As for me, I have had all I wanted from women without marriage” (*GAM*: 581) are suggestive of a theme that was to become increasingly important to Mansfield, who continued to interrogate the position and role of women, both in and out of marriage, in contemporary England.

“Germans at Meat” therefore can be said to illustrate Mansfield’s growing interest in the role of the family and marriage, the state of the nation, and other concerns that were to become increasingly the focus in some of the later modernist literature.

When a retrospective view is applied to these early stories against Mansfield’s later, more successful stories, it becomes apparent that these early stories lack the style and technique which bolster her later work. The stories in *In a German Pension* are constructed on a flat narrative surface, with a single, unambiguous voice in the female narrator. There is no complex interplay between different narrative layers or perspectives as exist in her more mature stories. The narrator’s comments are sometimes overstated: “‘How interesting’ I said, attempting to infuse just the right amount of enthusiasm into my voice” (*GAM*: 581). Berkman’s comment, that the “chief fault of the *Pension* stories is their underlining of the obvious” (Berkman 1951: 101) is convincing. She had not yet developed the subtlety of approach that would become so recognisable in her later work. It can be argued, as does Alpers, that, at this point, “Katherine was not yet master of her art” and that these early years were “betraying her into cynicism, self consciousness, unoriginality, and private emotionalism in her writing” (Alpers 1954: 180).

The development of Mansfield’s style was a progression influenced by a number of factors and contributed towards by different experiences. She was desperate to start writing: “I must get deep down into my book, for then I shall be happy...Oh I want this book to be written. It MUST be done” (*Journal*: 48), and her own incipient ideas on form, style and content were emerging. Many of Mansfield’s biographers have acknowledged the impact of her brother’s death, which provided a sudden, momentous catalyst. Her grief was profound, and the anguish of the experience appeared to open up channels of inspiration, and has thus often been given as the motivation for the turning point in her writing. In a journal entry written in January 1916, Mansfield reflects upon the impact that Leslie’s death has had on her writing. She feels that “never has my desire (to write) been so ardent” (*Journal*: 41). Mansfield developed an almost pathological sense that the only way she could maintain a connection with her brother was through her writing and felt herself to be under considerable

pressure to write, and to write well: “When I am not writing I feel my brother calling me, and he is not happy. Only when I write or am in a state of writing – a state of inspiration – do I feel that he is calm” (*Journal*: 43). She is explicit in her desire to allow her brother to be reborn through her writing; in her planning for “Prelude” she admits (at this point, most of her journal entries are addressed directly to Leslie): “I know what the last chapter is. It is your birth – your coming in Autumn” (*Journal*: 48). At this point, however, she was unable to separate her renewed energy and shift in focus from her sense of loss, and in another journal entry decides that her only interest now is in writing about her past and New Zealand, as a way of celebrating her brother, and their childhood: “Now – now I want to write recollections of my own country...my brother and I were born there...(and) in my thoughts I range with him over all the remembered places. I am never far away from them. I long to renew them in writing.” However, although much of her best work did draw on memories of people, places and incidents from her childhood in New Zealand, it is not for this alone that she became a memorable writer. The real value of this experience was to be found in the transformation of her writing style; she recognised that the old methods and techniques would not be able to accommodate this new energy and focus. She wrote of her new-found inspiration that “the form that I would choose has changed utterly. I feel no longer concerned with the same appearance of things. The people who lived or whom I wished to bring into my stories leave me perfectly cold...They are not near me. All the false threads that bound me to them are cut away quite” (*Journal*: 41). She thus began to sharpen her focus and technique, and in so doing, began to find her own, authentic voice.

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The publication of *Bliss and Other Stories* in 1920 marked a distinct turning point in Mansfield’s writing and in many ways was the unveiling of her new artistic sensibility. The earliest story to be included in the collection was “The Wind Blows”, written in 1915, so the collection could be viewed as a fairly expansive exhibition of Mansfield’s developing style between 1915 and 1920. This dissertation approaches one of the collection’s central stories,

“Prelude”, written in 1917, as illustrative of the transition and transformation of Mansfield’s focus and technique, and therefore of Mansfield’s importance as a modernist writer. “Prelude” was a reworking of a short novel Mansfield had written in 1915 called *The Aloe*. The resulting short story, “Prelude”, exposed Mansfield as having tapped into a distinctive new maturity and freshness of approach. “Prelude” is a central feature of this collection – indeed of the Mansfield oeuvre – because although it continues to foreground themes and ideas already featuring prominently in Mansfield’s writing, it also signified a turning point in her writing style. A close comparison of the differences between the two reveals how Mansfield’s technique had developed in the years between the writing of the two stories because we can identify those elements Mansfield felt compelled to modify. Although Mansfield did not record the process by which she rewrote *The Aloe*, we are able to identify something of her agenda by examining the sections she removed or added and thereby isolating quite specifically a number of motivating factors. She removed more than she added, and the majority of the excisions were motivated by her desire to prune away any superfluity in her writing. Significantly shorter and more compact than its original, “Prelude” therefore reveals more about Mansfield’s development as a writer in its ‘gaps’. Despite minor modifications and several exclusions, “Prelude” retained the bulk of *The Aloe*’s content; most of the adjustments Mansfield made to *The Aloe* were done in the name of form or style. Her excisions are therefore revealing firstly of her own developing ideas on the cultural and social issues of the day, and secondly of her ideas on style.

In terms of the six themes identified above, “Prelude” can be viewed as a turning point in Mansfield’s developing writing style – her overt exploration of the social and cultural issues of the day (the first grouping) began to give way to a more sensitive approach that relied on more sophisticated narrative devices (the second grouping). Mansfield’s journey from *The Aloe* to “Prelude” becomes therefore an evolutionary one. While it can be argued that in *The Aloe* Mansfield is more explicitly preoccupied with the essentially modernist themes of the family, ‘women’s issues’ (gender and sexuality) and the subjective isolation of the individual than in the later “Prelude”, it becomes clear that by the time she gets to

“Prelude”, she is starting to shy away from literal representations of these modernist issues. Mansfield adjusted her approach in such a way that these first three themes are approached less directly. This subtlety was achieved when she started to employ the techniques identified as belonging to the second group – the increasing effacement of a stable subject position, the layering of images, specifically light and nature, to create texture and meaning, and the epiphany or glimpse moment as climax point. The effect is, through its subtlety, more powerful.

Although Mansfield had already been making efforts and indications towards these techniques as early as, if not before, *The Aloe*, she fine-tuned them to greater effect in “Prelude”. The difference between the two stories becomes especially revealing when *The Aloe* is held up against its more subtle successor, “Prelude”. The leap between the two is therefore highly illustrative of Mansfield’s development as a modernist – *of the era* – yet unique – *ahead of the era* – literary voice. One is again called to question the reservations about Mansfield that dog her reputation. These two stories become a hinge-point between Mansfield writing as an emerging modernist commentator, and Mansfield writing with a precision and clarity that was as unique as it was innovative. A comparison of how each of these themes or devices is employed in either or both *The Aloe* and “Prelude” will therefore be revealing of this transition, and for this reason a close analysis of the two versions becomes the focal point of this dissertation.

The story concerns the Burnell family, who are moving house, and the action centres around the unpacking and settling in; the focus spotlights various characters – both adults and children – as they respond individually to each other and to the new environment. As the structural outline of the story, the Burnell’s relocation to a new house is of secondary importance. It served to provide Mansfield with the narrative context for the exploration of a number of topical issues. This story can be read as an enquiry into the reality of female and domestic experience, and the gendered aspects of identity and sexuality. Mansfield also continues to explore what was becoming a life-long interest in the idea that man is isolated in and by the subjectivity of his experience of life. The narrative therefore becomes a platform

on which Mansfield is able to reflect upon the 'hot topics' of the day – gender-related issues, identity, psychology.

In order to explore issues of female identity and sexuality Mansfield employs as a primary mechanism a multiple heroine. The female consciousness is represented by four central female characters: Mrs Fairfield, her two daughters, Linda Burnell and Beryl, and Kezia, one of Linda's three daughters. Each represents an aspect of femininity or female identity, and Mansfield uses each character to highlight a particular concern: Mrs Fairfield signifies all that is maternal and domestic; through Linda, Mansfield explores her ideas about gender roles (wife and mother); through Beryl she investigates the frustration of desire and of a yearning sensuality; the young Kezia serves to illustrate Mansfield's interest in the complexity of the child's consciousness. The reader is thus asked to look through Mrs Fairfield, Linda, Beryl and Kezia, and to assemble a portrait of female identity; the three older women are also situated so that they are viewed as possible models for the woman Kezia is still to become.

Mrs Fairfield, quiet and unassuming, dominates the maternal and domestic domain in the Burnell household. She represents the archetypal mother-figure: she chides and caresses her daughters and her granddaughters similarly. Knowing no other role, she accepts and even enjoys her maternal responsibilities, and fulfils them with evident satisfaction and pride. Her domain is clearly the kitchen; she installs herself in her new kitchen with efficiency and enthusiasm: "It was very hard to believe that they had only arrived yesterday and that she had not been in that kitchen for years - she was so much part of it" (*TA*: 36). Mrs Fairfield is thus presented as one aspect of female identity. Her daughters, however, are very differently inclined. Although she is married to the master of the house, and has borne him three children, Linda refuses the traditional roles of either wife or mother. She adopts instead the Victorian pose of the sensitive, aloof, semi-invalid. Dreamy and remote, she has little regard either for her children or for the daily routine of running a household. She relegates all responsibility to her mother and sister, Beryl.

Beryl represents a different face of female identity. As a young woman in full bloom, she is frustrated by her situation: she dreams of suitors and society balls, but is caught instead in a role of spinsterish sister-in-law and lady of the house, with none of the benefits. She too feels trapped in an unhappy situation for reasons out of her control; she had “the old thought the cruel leaping thought ‘if I had money’” (*TA*: 20). Vain and narcissistic, she feels her beauty and youth are wasted in the Burnell household, where all she meets are “rather fattish (men), the type who look frightfully indecent without waistcoats” (*TA*: 72). She fantasises about being rescued by a rich, handsome young man. Having no money of her own, and seeing no potential for finding a lover, Beryl worries that she will turn into “a most frightful frump in a year or two” (*TA*: 72). In a rare moment of honest self-awareness, she recognises how contrived her simulation of the feminine role often is: she sees herself in her mind’s eye “laughing a special trilling laugh if they had visitors, standing under the lamp if a man came to dinner, so that he should see how the light shone on her hair, pouting and pretending to be a little girl when she was asked to play the guitar” (*TA*: 77). In order to find love and sexual fulfilment she is driven to adopting the poses and devices of femininity.

At one point, Linda exclaims bitterly that she will never be the healthy, energetic wife and mother who can “rush downstairs, tear up a ladder, hang pictures, eat an enormous lunch” (*TA*: 28). This comment appears as a direct – though perhaps not conscious on her part – reference to her sister, Beryl, who has in fact spent the morning tearing up ladders and hanging pictures, and who has already been described as having a healthy appetite. Linda has made a ‘good’ marriage and has borne healthy children; but she is unhappy. Beryl is single, youthful and beautiful, but equally frustrated. Their older sister, Mrs Trout appears the model wife and mother: she “did everything there was to be done in the house and looked after the little boys and even worked in the garden” (again a direct contrast with Linda). She, too, is a melancholic and discontented figure: she “became a perfect martyr to headaches. Whole days she spent on the drawing room sofa with the blinds pulled down” (*TA*: 62). Mansfield brings her interest in the problematic and limited nature of the roles and identities available to

women to the forefront of this story by continually juxtaposing the different female characters and their respective roles and attitudes.

Linda's aversion to the sexual function of her relationship with Stanley is apparent. Her fertility is burdensome to her. She has borne him "three great lumps of children already" (*TA*: 70) and knows that there will be more. Dunbar (1997: 146) suggests that she is attracted to the aloe, a plant that flowers once every hundred years, because of its resistance to reproduction. She resents Stanley's sexual appetite; in a passage where she talks of her Newfoundland dog (transparently a referent for Stanley): "If only he didn't jump up at her so and bark so loudly...he was too strong for her...there were times when he was frightening, when she just hadn't screamed at the top of her voice: 'You are killing me'...Yes, yes it was true...for all her love and respect and admiration she hated him" (*TA*: 69-70).

She disguises her sexual anxiety by stressing her weak physical disposition: "I'm very delicate, you know as well as I do that my heart is seriously affected, and Doctor Dean has told you that I may die any moment" (*TA*: 70). Her pose of ailing indolence may therefore be interpreted as a woman's protection of her own identity against the demands made of her by her children and overbearing husband. She looks at the long sharp thorns on the aloe, and "at the sight of them her heart grew hard. She particularly liked the long sharp thorns. Nobody would dare to come near her ship or to follow after" (*TA*: 69).

Beryl again represents an alternative face of feminine sexuality. She consciously yearns for sexual and romantic fulfilment and fears that, lacking either, she will rot. She undresses for bed, "letting her clothes fall - pushing back with a charming gesture her warm, heavy hair...She shut her eyes a moment, but her lips smiled - her breath rose and fell in her breast like two fairy wings" (*TA*: 20). The heavy sensuousness of the moment is unmistakable. She allows herself to fantasise that a mysterious young man is standing in the garden under her window. She ashamedly admits to herself that her desire is often channelled towards Stanley, her own sister's husband. Similarly Mansfield exposes Mrs Trout's covetous fantasies about her brother-in-law. She imagines comforting Stanley as he tells her Linda has left him: "...and she put her hands on his shoulders" (*TA*: 65). Unlike Linda's fantasies of

escape, Beryl and Mrs Trout's fantasies are romantic and sexual. All three women may have sublimated their frustration to a socially acceptable level, but all are able to find release in fantasy. Thwarted passion and frustrated ambitions are revealed to be the cause of unhappiness for these women. On what would have been dangerous or taboo ground for a female writer of her generation, Mansfield explores, with what was to become typical delicacy the intensity and complexity of female sexuality.

As already noted, most of the changes Mansfield made to *The Aloe* involved deleting or paring down commentary or description. Many of the scenes she adjusted are ones which explore the issues of gender roles and sexual identity. The character of Linda Burnell, for example, features centrally in many of the revised scenes, which implies that in the years between *The Aloe* and "Prelude", Mansfield revised her own ideas about what she wanted Linda to represent. Through Linda, Mansfield explores her interest in gender roles and how attitudes towards marriage and the family were evolving. Linda's indifference towards her role as wife to her husband and mother to her children is a central concern of both versions of the story. The revisions Mansfield made to particular scenes or dialogues involving Linda in *The Aloe* achieved a two-fold result: first, the changes served to make Linda's indifference to her spousal and maternal duties more pronounced in "Prelude", thereby ensuring the reader's attention to this aspect, and second, and more importantly, Mansfield transforms Linda's stance of passive resistance to those duties to a much more *active* one.

The opening scene provides an example: Mrs Fairfield, Linda, Beryl and Linda's eldest daughter, Isabel, depart for their new house in the country. They are packed into the buggy with their "absolute necessities" and there is no room for the two youngest girls. Linda's flip dismissal of the two girls – "We shall simply have to cast them off" (*P*: 5) – immediately hints at the fact that she is not a traditional maternal figure. Their neighbour, Mrs Samuel Josephs, offers to mind the girls until they are able to follow later with the store-man. In *The Aloe*, Linda "pretend(s) to consider" the offer and replies "Yes, it really is quite the best plan". She then chides the two girls "Children, say 'Thank you' to Mrs Samuel Josephs...and be good obedient little girls..." (*TA*: 2). The scene in *The Aloe* plays out

between Linda, Mrs Samuel Josephs and the two girls; Linda is seen to be attempting to play the part of Mother. In “Prelude”, however, it is Mrs Fairfield who takes control of the situation. Mrs Fairfield responds to Mrs Samuel Josephs’ offer: “The *grandmother* considered. ‘Yes, it really is quite the best plan’” and it is Mrs Fairfield who tells the children to be “good little girls” (*P*: 6, italics my own). By shifting the maternal responsibility from Linda to Mrs Fairfield in this way (a change she affected throughout) Mansfield highlights Linda’s resistance to the prescribed maternal role without having to articulate it.

When the two girls finally do arrive at the house, Linda’s reaction to their arrival is noted. In *The Aloe* Linda is lying on a long cane chair in front of the fire; she asks: “‘Are those the children’ – Mrs Burnell did not even open her eyes – her voice was tired and trembling – ‘Have either of them been maimed for life?’” (*TA*: 17). Mansfield’s presents Linda sympathetically: she is a woman overcome with fatigue or illness and is ‘bearing up’ in the face of intolerable strain. One gets the sense that her feigned concern for her children’s well-being is almost commendable. In “Prelude”, however, Linda’s indifference is vocal and blatant. Linda, still lying by the fire, asks: “‘Are those the children?’ But Linda did not really care; she did not even open her eyes to see” (*P*: 11). Her lack of interest is unequivocally on display. In “Prelude” Mansfield shows Linda actively removing herself from her maternal duties (without having to pretend to be interested in them).

Similarly, Mansfield edited the scene in which, on the morning of the first day in their new house, Linda lies contemplatively in bed. She looks at the discarded pile of clothes - her “outdoor things” – that she had worn the day before. In *The Aloe*, the moment is described: “Looking at them a silly thought brought a fleeting smile into her eyes – ‘perhaps I am going away again today’ and for a moment she saw herself driving away from them all in a little buggy – driving away from every one of them and waving” (*TA*: 23). Linda’s unhappiness is barely more than implied. The thought is only ‘fleeting’ and she acknowledges it to be a ‘silly’ one. The same scene occurs in “Prelude”, but Mansfield adjusts her phrasing so that Linda’s stance of passive resistance (as seen in *The Aloe*) becomes very much an *active* one: “Looking at them (the outdoor things) she *wished* that she was going away from this house,

too. And she saw herself driving away from them all in a little buggy, driving away from everybody and *not even* waving” (*P*: 16). The difference between the former “for a moment she saw herself driving away” and the latter “she wished that she was going away” is considerable. Similarly, the difference between the former “driving away...and waving” and the latter “driving away...and not even waving” is, at first glance, a mere two words. The difference in meaning however, the gulfs which open up between the two ‘Linda’s’, is vast. What made the change between the two ‘Linda’s’ remarkable was the discretion with which Mansfield achieved it. She achieved the change without having to add information or description; in many instances descriptions are replaced with words or images, which often speak more loudly than bold declarations. It is one of the many examples of how Mansfield was beginning to excel at fine manoeuvring within the text to achieve a considerably vocal effect.

Although it has been argued that Mansfield took pains to make Linda’s apathy and indifference more explicit in “Prelude”, there was however no compromise to her lightness of touch. While she reworked some scenes in order that they were more plainly expressive of a particular idea (Linda’s attitude towards motherhood, for example), she reworked others so that they were more subtle and suggestive. Many of the scenes she deleted indicate that Mansfield was becoming wary of overstatement, and was working to mean more, by saying less. She removed, for example, a whole section describing Linda as a child: “She was a wild thing...ready for anything and eager...(but) People barely touched her, she was regarded as a cold, heartless little creature, but she seemed to have an unlimited passion for that violent sweet thing called life” (*TA*: 30). Similarly, Mansfield deleted an argument between Beryl and Linda: Linda calls herself a “perfect little icicle” and Beryl retorts “You mean you love to think you are...why do you always pretend to be so indifferent to everything...you pretend you don’t care where you live...or what happens to the children...you’ve kept it up for years” (*TA*: 64). By removing any excessive character description, Mansfield strove instead to reveal or illuminate her characters, rather than explain or analyse them. In 1917 in a letter to Dorothy Brett she described her approach to the characters of “Prelude”: “And just as on

those mornings white milky mists rise and uncover some beauty, then smother it again and then again disclose it, I tried to lift that mist from my people and let them be seen and then to hide them again" (*Letters 1*: 84).

Mansfield's reworking of the opening scene achieves a similar effect. In *The Aloe* Linda gestures officiously at the chairs and tables still standing on the lawn, telling Mrs Samuel Josephs that "Yes, everything outside the house must go" (*TA*: 2). The narrative voice observes that the chairs and tables are standing "impudently on their heads". In "Prelude" the observation is attributed to Linda herself: "How absurd they looked! Either they ought to be the other way up, or Lottie and Kezia ought to stand on their heads, too...It seemed to her...so exquisitely funny that she could not attend to Mrs Samuel Josephs" (*P*: 5). In "Prelude" Mansfield makes overt the fact that Linda classifies the children and surplus furniture similarly: they are unimportant, even tiresome, and can be left to be dealt with by the store-man. Further, Linda's private amusement at the mental image of both children and furniture standing on their heads on the lawn suggests a childishness that is at odds with traditional conceptions of a mother-figure. Mansfield casts Linda into the dichotomous role of child-mother. Interestingly, she had had a similar conception of Linda for *The Aloe*; both versions of the story are therefore concerned to introduce this idea, but Mansfield employed her new strategy to a more effective result in "Prelude". Several of the largest scenes that were cut from *The Aloe* involve conversations between Linda and her mother, or Mrs Fairfield and all three of her daughters. In one such scene, Mrs Fairfield, having instructed Linda to remain in bed in the morning, brings in a tray of breakfast. She fusses over Linda, buttoning on a "white woollen jacket trimmed with red bows", while Linda makes a face at her porridge and pouts (*TA*: 26). They argue, and Mrs Fairfield accuses her: "What a baby you are!"; Linda responds accordingly: she "jerked off the 'wooly'" and declares petulantly "I'm boiling, I'm roasting, I can't think what I'm doing in this big, stuffy old bed – I'm going to get up" (*TA*: 28). Linda is explicitly cast as the wayward child. In "Prelude" Mansfield removes this scene entirely, and but achieves the same effect by adding instead the moment of childish amusement Linda enjoys imagining the children standing on their heads with the

tables and chairs. In what was becoming a definitive Mansfield manoeuvre, the power of suggestion wins over copious description.

The numerous minor changes Mansfield made to *The Aloe* also illustrate her move towards economy and clarity. For example, when Stanley Burnell leaves for work in the morning, Linda reflects upon the rituals involved in his departure:

the house had to slow down each morning – had to stop like a steamer – every soul on board summoned to the gangway to watch Burnell descending the ladder... – they must wave when he waved – give him goodbye for goodbye and lavish upon him unlimited loving sympathy as though they saw on the horizon’s brim the untamed land to which he curved his chest so proudly, the line of leaping savages ready to fall upon his valiant sword...She did not rest again until the final slam of the front door sounded – and Stanley was gone (*TA*: 25).

This rather extravagant portrait of Stanley leaving for work is intended to illustrate Linda’s wry impatience with her husband. In “Prelude”, Mansfield adopts instead a more laconic approach with the simple: “Linda did not rest again until the final slam of the front door told her that Stanley was really gone” (*P*: 17). The same effect is achieved in one economical sentence with the addition of that one word ‘*really*’; the subtext is that Linda’s attitude to Stanley’s departure is one of relief.

Another example touches again on Linda’s attitudes towards the pressures facing her as wife and mother. In *The Aloe*, in the same conversation between Linda and her mother described above, they discuss Linda’s lack of interest in her role as mother, wife and homemaker. When Mrs Fairfield encourages Linda to take a look around the house, Linda admits “I don’t want to. I don’t care. The house can bulge cupboards and pantries, but other people will explore them. Not me...I don’t feel the slightest crumb of interest” (*TA*: 28). She feels that they all expect her to “*jump* out of bed...*fling* on my clothes, *rush* downstairs, *tear* up a ladder, hang pictures, eat an enormous lunch, romp with the children in the garden...and be swinging on the gate, when Stanley hove in sight this evening” (*TA*: 28). She is

contemptuous of this image of alleged domestic bliss.”. Although this scene does not appear in “Prelude”, Mansfield still manages to evoke Linda’s distaste for her wifely and maternal duties. This she achieves by inscribing Linda’s cry of protest subliminally into the text and into her character. Throughout Mansfield deleted comments or scenes from *The Aloe* that she must have felt spoke too baldly of feminist sentiment. In one scene Linda lies in bed remembering how she used to share her unconventional ambitions with her father: “When I am grown up we shall travel everywhere – we shall see the whole world...one day we shall be rich and the next poor...and we shan’t go as father and daughter...we’ll just go as a couple of boys together” (*TA*: 31). She remembers how Stanley Burnell pursued her, and how she acquiesced. Her bold childish ambitions were never realised. This scene was deleted, possibly because it seemed not only a redundant flood of character information, but also perhaps too obvious an indictment of marriage.

On one hand, therefore, this dissertation shows how Mansfield revised aspects of *The Aloe* to highlight and emphasise a particular point; on the other it is also shown that Mansfield removed certain scenes from *The Aloe* for fear of labouring a point with a too-heavy hand. It is true, as Hanson and Gurr (1981: 54) suggest, that her avoidance of rhetoric and polemic would become a distinguishing attribute of her writing.

Mansfield’s interest in the gulfs that separate individuals was also becoming more evident during this period. Linda and Stanley are often described as if they are physically far apart: when she says goodnight to him, “her faint far-away voice seemed to come from a deep well” (*TA*: 21). In the morning she lies in bed watching him dress for work. In *The Aloe*, she lay on the white tumbled bed and “leaned towards him laughing as if from the sky” (*TA*: 24). With “leaning towards him, laughing”, Mansfield still allows for some sense of communion between the two. In “Prelude” she widens the gulf between them: she “watched him as if from the clouds” (*P*: 16). Later, when Mrs Fairfield and Linda stand and look at the aloe together, Linda asks her: ““Do you feel it, too?” said Linda, and she spoke to her mother with the special voice that women use at night to each other as though they spoke in their sleep or from some hollow cave” (*P*: 38). However, when she asks her mother: “What have you been

thinking about?”, her mother replies “I haven’t really been thinking of anything”, and the moment passes. It has been a moment of intense introspection for Linda, but mother and daughter are unable to communicate their experiences of it.

The idea that man is enclosed in his own subjectivity was related to her interest in the conflict between an individual’s internal self, and the external self that is supposedly ‘known’. Mansfield deals overtly with this phenomenon through the character of Beryl. In the final section, Beryl writes a letter to her friend, Nan Pym. She writes chattily about the new house, about the unappealing men Stanley brings to the house to play tennis, of her new dress, but at the same time she recognises with distaste how frivolous and superficial she is being. “She felt all those things, but she didn’t really feel them *like that*. It was her other self... who had written that letter. It not only bored – it rather disgusted her real self” (TA: 74). Beryl’s thoughts have strong echoes in Mansfield’s own journals and letters. In a 1917 letter to Ottoline she talks of letters she had written, but not sent: “I could not re-read (my letters) but I know why they were not sent. They seemed to me (and they were) as I wrote them hopelessly superficial and fatiguing...I heard my own little, mocking, mechanical voice, loathed it and chose silence.” (*Letters 1*: 78)

Beryl admits to herself that “it wasn’t her nature at all...(but) if she had ever been her real self with Nan Fry, Nannie would have jumped out of the window with surprise” (TA: 74). Similarly in a letter to Murry Mansfield confesses: “I can’t write you the letters that I should like to, because my ‘vagrant self’ is uppermost, and you really don’t know her or want to know her” (*Letters 1*: 175). Here Mansfield continues to explore the idea that as individuals we are obliged to sublimate the socially unacceptable elements of our identity, the ‘selves’. Mansfield labours the point somewhat – Beryl continues: “There she was...playing the same old game – false, false as ever! ... False even when she was alone with herself... ‘I’m always acting a part. I’m never my real self for a minute” (TA: 77). She remembers the “tiny moments” when she was her real, honest self, and wonders if there will ever be a time when she would not have a false self.

Another change affected in the transition from *The Aloe* to “Prelude” was Mansfield’s erosion of the stable narrative voice in the latter. In *The Aloe*, the narrator’s voice provides detailed descriptions and background information: “The Samuel Josephs were not a family, they were a swarm. The moment you entered the house they cropped up...you could never be sure how many children there were...Mrs Samuel Josephs... seemed to take pride in it and bask in it from far away like a fat general watching through field glasses his troops in violent action...” (*TA*: 4). The narrator’s voice intrudes and serves to draw the reader in: “From the window *you* saw beyond...”, making him or her complicit in the omniscient perspective. This technique necessarily foregrounds the degrees of separation between various narrative layers (reader/narrator/character). In “Prelude” however, Mansfield removed the narrator’s voice and wrote instead directly from each character’s perspective. Here, and in many of her later stories, she slides seamlessly between multiple character perspectives, counter-pointing a range of individual viewpoints. An example of this is the delightful moment she adds to “Prelude”, which could be read as literally illustrative of how Mansfield shifts perspective: Kezia, wandering through her now-empty former home, alienated from her past and her family, looks through the panes of a coloured glass window: “One was blue and one was yellow...(she saw) a blue lawn with blue arum lilies growing at the gate, and then a yellow lawn with yellow lilies and a yellow fence. As she looked a little Chinese Lottie came out on to the lawn and began to dust the tables and chairs with a corner of her pinafore” (*P*: 7-8). One senses immediately the shift in perspective and heightened subjectivity of the moment: the narrative voice aligns itself with the child’s perspective to such an extent that it almost shifts into a first-person consciousness. The scene evokes the sense that understanding or interpretation of the lawn, the arum lilies, the gate, the fence, and even her own sister is dependent on the viewpoint of the beholder. This further undermines the idea of a central stable subject position: interpretation of reality can never be anything other than subjective.

Perspective and an imagistic style therefore operate concurrently to transform this scene. By tightly controlling the narrative perspective Mansfield is able, in one compact paragraph, to offer insight into the character of Kezia as well as details about the external

environment (garden, lilies, gate, fence), without having to describe any of them directly. Long explanatory descriptions are thus honed away to become tight, powerful images.

Most of the changes Mansfield made to *The Aloe* by removing or amending sections served to telescope her focus onto an image or moment. She chafed away at images and moments in order to ensure that they were stylistically sharper and more powerful. She worked to harness the intensity of those moments and developed a technique of ‘layering’ them over each other. In “Prelude”, for example, she presents such a layering of images or ‘snapshots’: Kezia bites a piece out of her bread and stands it up on her plate, where it makes a “dear little sort of gate” (*P*: 7); in the same scene she catches a secret tear “with a neat little whisk of her tongue and ate it” before anyone could see it (*P*: 7). While dressing for work on their first morning in the house, Stanley pulls his shirt over his head only to find it is still buttoned closed; even the impassive Linda enjoys the comic moment as he staggers blindly about the room with his arms waving (*P*: 16). Distressed by Pat the handyman’s beheading of the duck, Kezia finds solace in and is distracted by Pat’s little, round, gold earrings; the moment is poignant as well as sensuous – ““Do they come on and off?” she asked huskily” (*P*: 33) – but is evoked rather than described. (Although many of these moments do appear in *The Aloe*, in her revision Mansfield adjusted particular words in order to sharpen the emotive content of each image). The strength of these moments lies in their subtlety; Mansfield replaces ‘hard’ descriptions with ‘soft’ suggestions. She wrote to Murry of “Prelude” in 1918 that “I meant it to be ‘delicate’ – just that” (*Letters 1*: 183). The story becomes a compound of visual images: detail or information is relayed in such a way that it becomes sensory or intuitive (visual) rather than cerebral or rational (verbal). The effect is the distillation of a sequence of sensory perceptions into a narrative format. By excising that which was unnecessary, she ensured that that which remained contained the intensity and simplicity of the moment or the feeling she wanted to evoke. It was a ‘less-is-more’ approach that was to become the defining characteristic of her later work.

Mansfield also used images of light to powerful effect in her writing – scenes are lit significantly by moonlight, firelight, lamplight. To Dorothy Brett she describes how her

method in “Prelude” was to try “catch that moment – with something of its *sparkle* and its flavour” (*Letters 1*: 83). In “Prelude” she describes the young girls’ approach to the new house: “Someone was walking through the empty rooms carrying a lamp. From a window downstairs the light of a fire flickered. A strange beautiful excitement seemed to stream from the house in quivering ripples” (*P*: 225). This echoes a comment to Koteliensky in a 1915 letter: “Do you ever feel as though the Lord threw you into the very exact centre of eternity, and even as you plunge you felt every...single ripple floating away and touching and drawing into its circle every slightest thing it touched?” (*Letters 1*: 28).

Similar to her use of light, Mansfield used images of nature as a motif to represent ideas or concerns of the human world. The aloe tree, for example, has been said to symbolise female sexuality or, more generally, a fundamental life force (Hanson and Gurr 1981: 52). In “Prelude”, the way each of the characters respond to the tree (if at all) is revealing of something about their own natures. Linda’s identification with the aloe tree growing in front of their new house symbolises the feelings of hostility and defiance she is obliged to suppress. The aloe is dark, mysterious and menacing: a “fat, swelling plant with its cruel leaves and fleshy stem. High above them...it might have had claws instead of roots. The curving leaves seemed to be hiding something” (*P*: 23). As she stands looking at it in the moonlight, she fantasises that the aloe becomes a ship on which she is sailing away:

the high grassy bank on which the aloe rested rose up like a wave, and the aloe seemed to ride upon it like a ship ...She dreamed she was caught up out of the cold water into the ship...they rowed far away over the top of the garden trees, the paddocks and the dark bush far beyond. Ah, she heard herself cry: ‘Faster! Faster!’ to those who were rowing (*P*: 38).

Linda clearly feels trapped in her role of mother and wife; it is significant that the aloe features in her dreams of escape.

In *The Aloe*, the view from a window is described: “From the window you saw beyond the dark a deep gully filled with tree ferns and...a broad stone wall against which the

sea chafed and thundered...the wild trees lashed together and big gulls wheeling and crying skimmed past the misty window” (TA: 8). Such details are provided presumably to enhance atmosphere and create through parallel imagery an ominous mood. In this same section Mansfield parenthetically describes the conditions of Kezia’s birth: “She had come forth squealing out of a reluctant mother in the teeth of a ‘Southerly Buster’” which we can assume is intended to indicate something of the child’s strength and wilfulness. Mansfield cut this paragraph in “Prelude”, along with many others, and found that tone and atmosphere, and character information could be imparted more economically and more effectively.

Mansfield significantly uses the moon to light scenes in which characters approach their ‘glimpse’ moment. The moonlight frequently reveals a truth the character has subconsciously been taking pains to avoid. It brings the light of understanding and self-awareness, and this moment of illumination is inevitably the climax point of the story. Beryl’s moment of introspection in front of the mirror as she undresses, takes place while she is “standing in a pool of moonlight” (P: 13). Beryl is consciousness of her burning but frustrated sensuality. In *The Aloe*, Linda, looking out of the window, “felt as though the moon had risen – that she was being bathed in cold light” (TA: 48); the imperative to acknowledge the truth of her unhappiness is pressing. In “Prelude”, the word ‘bathed’ is significantly replaced: “she felt as though the moon had risen – that she was being strangely *discovered in a flood of light*” (P: 27, italics my own). This change serves to highlight the light/self-awareness metaphor. The significance of this moonlit scene is that, unlike Beryl who embraces the truth discovered in the moonlight, Linda turns away: “she shivered; she came away from the window and sat down...beside Stanley”. She refutes the truth it illuminates.. Later, however, she stands with her mother in front of the aloe: “The moon...was full, and the house, the garden, the old woman and Linda – all bathed in dazzling light” (P: 37). She begins to submit to the light of the moon: it is at this point that she, possibly for the first time, consciously considers and evaluates her relationship with Stanley: “For all her love and respect and admiration, she hated him...It had never been so plain to her as it was at this moment” (P: 39).

It has been argued that “Prelude” appears as a central story in the Mansfield collection because of how revealing it is of her interest in the “fashionable, new-fangled ideas” of the day and also of her developing literary style. The comparison with its predecessor *The Aloe* illustrates how Mansfield’s focus was changing; she was moving away from transparent representation and towards a more sophisticated construction based on an innovative, personal style.

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It has been argued that “Prelude” was the crystallising point in Mansfield’s career in terms of her focus on issues surrounding the family, women, and the individual consciousness, and in terms of the development of her technique (manipulation of a stable narrative voice, imagistic use of light and nature and the progression towards a climax or glimpse point). The work written after this point can be seen to illustrate to a lesser or greater degree the progression of this development. The next story to be reviewed is one in which Mansfield explores another female consciousness; what makes this story different is that she introduces a male consciousness as a secondary narrative voice. “Psychology”, also included in *Bliss and other stories*, was speculated to have been written in 1919 (Dunbar 1997: 100). It provides another clear example of the direction her interest was taking and offers, in addition, further support for the argument that Mansfield’s contribution to the literature of the era was a fundamentally modernist one.

In “Psychology”, Mansfield briefly turns her interrogative lens onto two characters who come into focus without names or any physical description. It is early evening, and he stops by her house for an unexpected visit. They are friends but the intensity of the dynamic between them reaches towards a relationship that is more than platonic. The narrative is constructed on this potential development of their friendship into something more: both characters privately consider the nature of their relationship while all the time conversing politely on other much safer topics.

“Psychology” is primarily revealing of how Mansfield was responding keenly to the all new modern fascination with the individual, the focus on the personal, the interior. That

the story is entitled “Psychology” is a direct referent of her interest in what Dunbar (1997: 103) refers to as the “then avant-garde subject of psycho-analysis”. Indeed, the male visitor argues “this generation is just wise enough to know that it is sick and to realise that the only chance of recovery is by going into its symptoms ... trying to get at the root of the trouble” (*Ps*: 88).

In “Psychology” Mansfield continues to develop her interest in using split narrative levels to explore how the individual is isolated in his or her own subjective experience of the world. Here this is seen in the different levels of dialogue that occur in the story: the first layer is the spoken conversation between the two characters, the second is the subconscious dialogue taking place in their minds and the third is the metatextual commentary inserted by the narrator.

Their nervous conversation betrays their awkwardness with each other. They fill the conversational space between them with inanities about tea and cake, while all the while their minds analyse and assess the unarticulated currents of feeling that pass between them. Most of the ‘dialogue’ therefore takes place subconsciously. The focus flits from his consciousness to hers as they approach but also move away from mutual understanding. Their encounter is compromised by profound miscommunication and there appears, at times, to be more fluency in their subconscious dialogue than in their faltering spoken conversation. A comparison of the two dialogues that occur when he arrives – one verbal, the other subconscious – is illustrative. Their parry of spoken niceties when he arrives is burdened with negatives: “Not busy?” “No, just going to have tea.” “And you’re not expecting anybody?” “Nobody at all” (*Ps*: 85). The rest of their spoken conversation continues in a similarly uncomfortable, uncertain way. By contrast, their ‘secret selves’ whisper conspiratorially: “Why should we speak? Isn’t this enough?” “More than enough. I never realised until this moment...” “How good it is just to be with you...” “Like this...” “It’s more than enough” (*Ps*: 85). Subconsciously they appear to engage more harmoniously than their conscious selves and the tone is optimistic. That they rush to finish each other’s sentences suggests a congruence that

is usually only found in couples who know each other well enough to anticipate the other's thoughts.

They are initially pleased with the perceived congruity of their thoughts and intentions: "Yes, that is what he waited for and so did she" (*Ps*: 86). She feels that, "like two open cities in the midst of some vast plain, their minds lay open to each other...making the most of this extraordinary absolute chance which made it possible for him to be utterly truthful to her and for her to be utterly sincere with him" (*Ps*: 86). Their encounter does not however convince the reader of the verity of this claim. The distance between them and the failed communication is revealed: "she could not discover where exactly they were or what exactly was happening...And just as she got so far it happened again. They faltered, wavered, broke down, were silent" (*Ps*: 88). It is true, as is suggested by Hanson and Gurr (1981: 14) that in much of Mansfield's writing: "male and female roles are polarised, and only rarely does the experience of two sexes meet and become communicable". They are themselves conscious of the dual level of conversation: he is impatient with their "ordinary maddening chatter"; "what have we been talking about?" thought he"; "what a spectacle we have made of ourselves, thought she" (*Ps*: 89).

Like so many of Mansfield's characters, they approach and circle, but ultimately try to avoid, their moment of truth by chattering over it. They deliberately shy away from silences in which both their minds would wander into 'unsafe' territory. There is a loaded moment as they become conscious that: "a new silence came between them...nothing like the satisfactory pause that had followed their greetings... (this silence was) an unfamiliar pool" (*Ps*: 87). They both move quickly away from the edge and the narrator observes, not without a hint of irony, that: "then both of them broke [the silence] ... Both of them escaped ... Quickly! Quickly! They must stop it from happening again." She inwardly congratulates them both on having averted an awkward silence: "On the talk went. And now it seemed they really had succeeded...Her smile said 'We have won.' And he smiled back, confident: 'Absolutely'." The narrator, however, refuses them this victory: "but the smile undid them. It

lasted too long, it became a grin. They saw themselves as two little grinning puppets, jiggling away in nothingness" (*Ps*: 89).

Such narrative commentary is frequently inserted to disturb the illusion of these supposedly shared moments: "They were off and all was as usual. But was it? Weren't they just a little too quick, too prompt with their replies, too ready to take each other up?" (*Ps*: 88). The function of the narrative voice is therefore a provocative one. The narrator highlights the irony in their belief that "the special thrilling quality of their friendship was in their complete surrender" (*Ps*: 86) which is ultimately shown to be naïve: it is precisely because neither of them are able to surrender that their friendship will not attain the truly special and thrilling quality that they both desire.

Mansfield's interest in light and illumination both literal and metaphorical is a key feature of her writing. In "Psychology", references to fire and light thread through the story and Mansfield uses the images to impart both meaning (to shed light on her characters) and atmosphere (glow). Their conversation takes place at the hearth; he warms his hands, she tends the fire. Mansfield uses the energy of the "quick, leaping flame" and the "fluttering fire" to hint at their heightened emotions. The new silence that settles between them is described as an "unfamiliar pool – and the ripples flowed away, away – boundlessly far – into deep glittering darkness" in contrast with the safe, comfortable silences that they are used to; silences that can be "contained in the circle of warm, delightful fire and lamplight" (*Ps*: 87-88).

The two characters stabilise their delicate friendship by remaining in the light, where it is safe: she lights the lamp and pulls the curtains and he wants to draw their two chairs up to the light. There is a sense of approaching danger – truth – in the darkness: "They were conscious of the boundless questioning dark...two hunters, bending over their fire, but hearing suddenly from the jungle beyond a shake of wind and a loud, questioning cry...". They refuse to answer the questioning cry, articulated by the narrator: "Well. Why didn't they just give way to it – yield – and see what would happen then? But no." (*Ps*: 88). Their progress towards each other is marred by perpetual withdrawals; they do not yield to the

boundless questioning dark and its obligations to honesty: “And then both of them broke it: She said: “I must make up the fire...” (*Ps*: 88).

Although they “stood silent in the leaping light”, at the end both are forced to recognise that the gulfs between them may be too wide to cross, and that they have failed. They can no longer support the burden of the dual conversation taking place between them, the weight of their unspoken thoughts and desires is too great. Their silence becomes an anguish for them both and he longs for “another way for them to speak to each other, in the new way he wanted to murmur: ‘do you feel this too? Do you understand it at all?’” (*Ps*: 89). This moment of frustration over failed communication was fast becoming a Mansfield trademark.

Mansfield does however offer a glimmer of hope in the closing scene. After he has left, the woman meets an old flower seller at her front door. This time she does not shy away from the light: “again she felt the silence that was like a question. But this time she did not hesitate. She moved forward. Very softly and gently, as though fearful of making a ripple in that boundless pool of quiet, she put her arms around her friend” (*Ps*: 90).

It will be shown that Mansfield frequently used the thread of parallel images (‘visual echoes’) to pull the reader’s attention back to the central themes of the story. In “Psychology” the failure of her encounter with her friend is contrasted (in a slightly overstated way) with the success of the encounter with the flower seller. She tells the woman “Good night my friend, come again soon”. In contrast to the anguish she felt after her encounter with her friend, after this encounter with the flower seller, “she felt so light, so rested, as if she had woken up out of a childish sleep. Even the act of breathing was a joy...” (*Ps*: 91). The ellipsis points towards the future, towards potential yet to be realised. Now that she has awoken from her childish sleep... She sits down immediately to write him a letter. She closes with the same farewell she gave to the old woman “Good night my friend, come again soon”. (*Ps*: 91). The story therefore closes on a note of hope. Mansfield seems to be suggesting that moments of connection are indeed possible if one is brave enough to take the

leap. Mansfield grants her female protagonist her glimpse moment in a narrative sleight of hand, misplaced and unexpected, but illuminating nonetheless.

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The title story of the same collection, “Bliss”, first appeared in print in the *English Review* in August 1918 (Alpers 1954: 264). It was Mansfield’s first appearance in a journal of literary standing, and was her first work to earn her more than nominal payment (Alpers 1954: 264). Hanson and Gurr (1981: 58) argue that it was “Bliss” that established Mansfield as one of the modernists. Certainly it becomes another revealing illustration of Mansfield’s insights into the issues of the day and developing technique.

“Bliss” tells of a day and a night in the life of Bertha Young as she prepares for a dinner party. Not unlike “Prelude” or “Psychology”, the action provides only a slight narrative structure; the focus is Bertha’s stream of thoughts and sense-perceptions as the day unfolds. Parallels with her earlier stories abound, indicating that Mansfield remained interested in the modernist ideas on gender roles, female sexuality, and the isolation of the individual’s subjective experience of life. “Bliss” is also revealing of Mansfield’s developing use of an unstable narrative voice, of images of nature and light and of the ‘glimpse’ moment.

In “Bliss” Mansfield once again presents three different faces of feminine identity in Bertha, Mrs Norman Knight and Pearl Fulton. Bertha’s youthful enthusiasm masks an immaturity and a juvenile lack of self-awareness; Mrs Norman Knight, known as Face, is vigorous but almost asexual and Pearl Fulton is mysterious and sensual, and represents the mirror image of Bertha in terms of sexual maturity.

The story opens with an observation about Bertha’s immaturity: despite her age, she still has moments of wanting to behave like a child, to “run instead of walk, to take dancing steps on and off the pavement, to bowl a hoop, to throw something up in the air and catch it again, or to stand still and laugh at – nothing” (B: 69). Throughout the story, the reader’s attention is drawn to Bertha’s childlike energy (her surname is Young, an obvious pun), and her efforts to stifle it. She tries to check her enthusiasm and her comical notions, scolding

herself: “No, no, I’m getting hysterical” (B: 70), or “I’m absurd, absurd!” (B: 73). At one point she has to dig her nails into her hands to stop herself from laughing too much; she feels she “must laugh or die” (B: 77).

On the surface there is the sense that Bertha feels frustrated by the requirements of adulthood, the expected thoughts and behaviour that accompany the roles of wife, mother, hostess. More than once she cries out about “how idiotic civilisation is”, a civilisation that won’t let her express herself unashamedly. In the opening paragraphs she complains: “Why be given a body if you have to keep it shut up in a case like a rare, rare fiddle?” (B: 69). Her frustration at the role prescribed to her is evoked in the simple gesture of removing her jacket. Despite the chill in the air, Bertha throws off her coat, “she could not bear the tight clasp of it another moment” (B: 69), echoing Linda’s petulant throwing off of the ‘wooly’ in *The Aloe*.

She feels a similar detachment from her role as mother. She visits her child in the nursery, and holding it in her arms, says “You’re nice...I’m fond of you. I like you” (B: 71). The expression is awkward, and rings more of a child talking to her doll than a mother to her child. She feels the disapproval of the nurse “when she had come into the nursery at another wrong moment” (B: 70), and dare not ask the nurse whether the child had been safe clutching the big dog’s ear, as if she too is the nurse’s ward rather than her employer. She watches the nurse with her child, “her hands by her side, like the poor little girl in front of the rich little girl with the doll” (B: 70). She casts them all into the role of children, playing house. This supports the sense that Bertha feels unable to fully and sincerely adopt the roles required of her, and is merely playing the part.

A closer reading of the subtext however – articulated by the narrative voice – reveals a darker truth about Bertha’s subconscious: despite her ostensible frustration, it is Bertha’s immaturity that enables her to resist the obligations of adulthood. Bertha’s naiveté is therefore subconsciously self-maintained but her resistance to self-knowledge is gradually being eroded, represented by the growing – glowing – feeling she has no word for other than “bliss”. Throughout the story Bertha considers this feeling with a sense of curious – but cautious – wonderment. As she tries to make sense of the evening she is obliged to loosen the

protective cloak of her naiveté, and the story thus becomes a journey into self-awareness. Sandley (1994: 79) suggests that Mansfield's use of punctuation, particularly the ellipsis and the dash, conveys her characters' strategies of mental evasion and deferral. This is especially evident in "Bliss", where the dashes and ellipses can be read as moments where Bertha or the narrative voice pulls up, resisting, just short of the truth. For example, the narrative voice is tripped up over a description of Harry as Bertha subconsciously circles the truth: "It was part of his – well, not his nature, exactly, and certainly not his pose – his something or other – to talk about food" (*B*: 76). Beneath Bertha's apparent admiration of her husband the narrative voice therefore inserts a subtext of condescension. Although she greatly appreciates his "zest for life" her unspoken reservations about Harry's character are revealed in the dashes and ellipses as she claims to understand his:

passion for fighting – for seeking in everything that came up against him another test of his power and of his courage – that too, she understood. Even when it made him just occasionally, to other people, who didn't know him well, a little ridiculous perhaps...for there were moments when he rushed into battle where no battle was... (*B*: 75).

Like Stanley Burnell, on the surface Harry is vital and manly; but the underlying tone is less favourable and hints at Harry's foolish machismo.

Unable to be truly Mother, Bertha is equally uncomfortable with the role of lover. Although of course "they got on splendidly and were really good pals" (*B*: 73), and "Oh, she'd loved him ... just not in that way" (*B*: 78). When it occurs to her, mid-way through dinner, that she for the first time desires her husband, it is a "strange and almost terrifying" thought (*B*: 78). She jumps up and runs to the piano, crying out "What a pity someone does not play! What a pity someone does not play!"; she tries to refute the truths that are forcing their way to the surface of her subconscious. The narrative voice once again articulates the truth that Bertha is unable to: that this may be the moment of Bertha's sexual awakening. "Ardently! Ardently! The word ached in her ardent body! Was this what that feeling of bliss

had been leading up to?" (B: 79). The irony of this awakening being precipitated by her experience with Pearl Fulton is that Bertha's new-found desire will more than likely not be fulfilled tonight: she learns at the end of the evening that it is Pearl, not Bertha, who is the object of her husband's desire.

Once again Mansfield records her own frustrations at man's inability to truly share his experiences of the world with another person. On the phone to Harry, Bertha wants to explain how she is feeling, to share her feeling of bliss with him: "'Oh Harry!'... What had she to say? She'd nothing to say. She only wanted to get in touch with him for a moment. 'What is it?' rapped out the little voice. 'Nothing' said Bertha" (B: 71). The moment passes; real communication has again failed.

Bertha's relationship with Pearl Fulton is particularly revealing of this theme. Bertha is drawn to Pearl, who is "a beautiful woman who had something strange about her" (B: 72). She considers their relationship: Pearl was "wonderfully frank, but the certain point was there, and beyond that she would not go" (B: 72). Mansfield returns again to the idea of that certain point – Pater's "thick wall of impersonality" – beyond which people *cannot* go in terms of how much they are able to reveal themselves to other people, how truly 'frank' they are able to be. Unlike Mansfield, Bertha is naively optimistic about the possibility of a real connection, between women at least. When Pearl arrives, Bertha projects her own euphoric feelings onto her: "Bertha knew, suddenly, as if the longest, most intimate look had passed between them – as if they had said to each other: 'You too?' – that Pearl Fulton...was feeling just what she was feeling" (B: 75).

Both "Prelude" and "Psychology" have already been shown to contain almost identical moments: in "Prelude" Linda asks her mother "Do you feel it too?"; in "Psychology" he wants to murmur "in the new way, 'do you feel this too? Do you understand it at all?'" Although what 'it' is is never articulated, Mansfield herself talks of it as an inability to express feelings of bliss – her own personal 'glimpse' moment. She records her frustration in a letter to Ottoline Morrell: "I long to tell someone – to feel it immediately

shared – felt without my asking “do you feel it?” - Do you know what I mean?” (*Letters 1*: 231).

When Bertha parts the curtains to show Pearl the garden and the pear tree, she believes it to be a moment of pure communion between the two women: “Both were caught, as it were, in that circle of unearthly light, understanding each other perfectly” (*B*: 77). On the surface one might assume that this is a successful ‘aloe moment’, one in which the gulf is traversed and people do connect. The tragic irony is still to be revealed: at the close of the evening Bertha sees Pearl and Harry embrace and realises Pearl’s affections lie with Harry, not Bertha. She has misread much of both Pearl and her husband’s demeanour. There is pathos in Bertha’s belief in Harry’s claim that he finds Pearl “dullish and cold” and in her intentions to try convince him, when they are in bed together later, that he is mistaken.

In “Bliss” Mansfield continues to experiment with merging the narrative voice with the consciousness of the primary character. Though not quite a stream-of-consciousness, the narrator’s voice appears as an extension of Bertha’s consciousness. The proximity of the narrative voice to Bertha’s own consciousness makes Bertha’s naiveté and the revelation of the betrayal all the more painful.

Observations and comments that appear as direct expression: “‘I’m too happy – too happy!’ she murmured” (*B*: 73) are however given a more sophisticated vocalisation in the narrative voice: the extended metaphor linking her feeling of bliss to fire and light, for example, appears only in the narrator’s observations. The tone and elocution is Bertha’s (How strong the jonquils smelled in the warm room. Too strong? Oh no.) but Bertha’s naiveté closes her off to truths that are accessible only to the narrative voice. Mansfield therefore gives the narrator access not only to a more sophisticated discourse, but also to a clearer understanding of each character and the relationships between them. The reader is therefore given insight into events as they unfold. While everyone stands waiting for Pearl to arrive, the narrator observes that they were all “just a trifle too much at their ease, a trifle too unaware” (*B*: 75). The allusion is so subtle as to be missed altogether but hints at the danger lying ahead. Like the couple in “Psychology”, Bertha feels rapturous over the assumed moment of

pure rapport she has with Pearl in front of the pear tree, and similarly the narrative voice intrudes suggestively: “Or did Bertha dream it?” (*B*: 77). When Bertha bids her guests goodnight, the narrator is allowed to leap portentously ahead to the moment when Bertha will realise the truth about Pearl and Harry, and after which nothing will be the same, with the “feeling that this self of hers was taking leave of them forever” (*B*: 79). The notion of multiple selves also recurs.

In a similarly experimental vein, around the time that she was writing “Bliss” Mansfield consciously started to reach towards a definition of the ‘glimpse’ moment. In a letter to Murry in 1918 she speaks of the “sort of writing I could only do in just that state of being, in some perfectly blissful way at peace. Then something delicate and lovely seems to open up before my eyes, like a flower without thought of a frost or a cold breath, knowing that all about it is warm and tender and ‘ready’” (*Letters I*: 119)

Although here she was speaking generally about her developing writing style, it could be a description of what she achieved with “Bliss”. Not for the first or the last time Mansfield’s narrative glimpse moment is a moment of self-awareness, often revealing either a yearning or an intense experience of beauty and nowhere is this more evident than in “Bliss”. So it is with Bertha, who, like Beryl in “Prelude”, or Laura in “The Garden Party”, has a moment of self-reflection in front of the mirror: “She hardly dared look into the cold mirror – but she did look, and it gave her back a woman, radiant, with smiling, trembling lips, with big, dark eyes and an air of listening, waiting for something...divine to happen... that she knew must happen...infallibly.” (*B*: 69-70)

For both Beryl and Bertha the experience is a sense of anticipation, or as Mansfield described it above in her letter to Murry, of being ‘ready’. In “Bliss” the ‘glimpse’ moment is Bertha’s experience of a feeling she literally verbalises as bliss: “...you are overcome, suddenly, by a feeling of bliss – absolute bliss!” (*B*: 69). Here Mansfield creates – possibly more so than in any of her other stories – an explicit relationship between the recurrent light motif and the ‘glimpse’ moment. Bertha’s feeling of bliss is represented throughout with

imagery of light or fire. Images of radiance, fire, illumination are prevalent. Bertha tries to describe the feeling:

as though you'd suddenly swallowed a bright piece of that late afternoon sun and it burned in your bosom, sending out a little shower of sparks into every particle, into every finger and toe... in her bosom there was still that bright glowing place – that shower of sparks coming from it. It was almost unbearable. She hardly dared breathe for fear of fanning it higher, and yet she breathed deeply, deeply (*B*: 69).

Throughout the story, Bertha's feeling of bliss features as a play of light over the scene, illuminating and revealing as it lands. Just as Mansfield intended for *The Aloe*, she presents "people rather dark and seen strangely as they move in the sharp light and shadow" (*Letters I*: 18). The play of light therefore becomes a visual representation of Bertha's journey of self-discovery: as she moves towards a more mature understanding of herself and of her husband the feeling of bliss intensifies and light shines increasingly over the scene; shadows retreat and the truth – represented ultimately by the pear tree, illuminated by the moon - stands in a flood of light.

The feeling starts as a "little shower of sparks", the "the fire of bliss that Bertha did not know what to do with" (*B*: 75). When she sees the firelight shining on her daughter's toes, "all her feeling of bliss came back again, and again she didn't know how to express it – what to do with it." (*B*: 71). It becomes a tentative movement towards awareness, with the light flickering and slowly settling on points of illumination. She tries repeatedly to quell the feeling: she hugs a cushion to her chest "passionately, passionately, but it did not put out the fire in her bosom. Oh, on the contrary!" (*B*: 72). In the opening scene, Bertha pauses in the dusky dining room. Mary, the maid, asks "Shall I turn on the light, m'm?" to which Bertha replies: "No, thank you, I can see quite well." (*B*: 70). On the contrary, it is only as the evening progresses, and the lights are turned up, that Bertha truly begins to see. Later, Bertha tells Face: "Don't turn up the light for a moment, it is so lovely" (*B*: 77). Bertha's innocence – preserved in dusky shadows – appears as a direct contrast to Pearl's conscious – radiant –

sensual awareness. Throughout Pearl is described as lit by her silver dress, the moonlight, the firelight. Light seems to emanate from her: she “sat there turning a tangerine in her slender fingers that were so pale a light seemed to come from them” (*B*: 76); at the end she lays her “moonbeam fingers” on Harry’s cheeks. Despite her subconscious reluctance, Bertha’s feeling is fanned into intensity by Pearl Fulton: “what was there in the touch of that cool arm that could fan – fan – start blazing – blazing – the fire of bliss” (*B*: 75), and ultimately reaches the climax point: “it seemed, like the flame of a candle, to stretch up, to point, to quiver in the bright air, to grow taller and taller as they gazed – almost to touch the rim of the round, silver moon” (*B*: 77). The intensification of the light – from a spark to a tall flame – represents Bertha’s move into a better understanding – an illumination – of herself and an awareness of the truth about her marriage.

Mansfield returns again to images of nature, and frequently draws parallels between women and nature, especially trees and plants. Both “Prelude” and “Bliss” feature a pair of women, who contemplate a tree (the aloe, and the pear tree respectively) in the moonlight, and the understanding that the experience brings them. Both are moments of awakening: Bertha feels a conscious connection to the pear tree: “she seemed to see on her eyelids the lovely pear tree with its wide open blossoms as a symbol of her own life.” (*B*: 73). When she dresses for dinner, she wears “a white dress, a string of jade beads, green shoes and stockings” (*B*: 73). With characteristic economy Mansfield links Bertha to the pear tree without a direct reference to the tree itself. The comparison is skilfully concealed in two simple lines: “It wasn’t intentional”, the word *it* alluding to the similarity between Bertha’s outfit and the pear tree; and the description: “her petals rustled”. Similarly, Pearl is linked to the tree (Pearl/pear) in her silver dress. Bertha muses that the pear tree “would be silver now....silver as Miss Fulton” (*B*: 76).

Mansfield also uses plants and animals to extend the parallel imagery to the other characters. If both Bertha and Pearl have been compared to the pear tree, Mrs Norman Knight, wearing a red flannel coat and a yellow silk dress, can be linked to the red and yellow tulips in the garden (both feature as ‘extras’ to the event taking place on the main stage).

While she is preparing for the party, Bertha sees two cats creeping through the garden, and the moment is a foreboding one: “The sight of them, so intent and so quick, gave Bertha a curious shiver. ‘What creepy things cats are!’” (B: 72-3). The menacing image of the cats hangs suspended till the end, when it is book-ended with another reference, this time linking the silvery Pearl to the grey cat: “And then she was gone, with Eddie following, like the black cat following the grey cat” (B: 80). Bertha’s curious shiver therefore appears as a subconscious premonition of the horrible truth she will learn later that night.

The internal structure of the story is built on key images of light and fire. Similarly, there is an almost cyclical repetition of other key images: the silver of the grapes: “white grapes covered with a silver bloom” (B: 70); the silver of Pearl Fulton’s dress; the silver of the pear tree in the silver moonlight; and the “blissful treasure that burned in their bosoms and dropped, in silver flowers, from their hair and hands” (B: 77). Similarly, the cohesion of the story relies on the symmetry of other images: the “yellow pears, smooth as silk” (B: 70) with the silver pear tree; the creeping cats in the garden are mirrored with Pearl and Eddie at the end; the jade-green sky, Bertha’s string of jade beads and green shoes, the “green of pistachio ices – green and cold like the eyelids of Egyptian dancers” (B: 76). Pearl’s apparent ‘sleepiness’ threads through the evening: her “heavy eyelids...a strange half-smile” (B: 75), a “cool, sleepy voice” (B: 77), and a “sleepy smile” (B: 80), and signifies a quiet ‘knowing’, juxtaposing Bertha’s energetic ignorance.

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“Miss Brill”, written in December 1920, appeared in *The Garden Party and Other Stories* which was published in 1922. Like “Bliss”, Mansfield’s method in “Miss Brill” (1920) is that of the dramatic monologue. The story follows what Hanson and Gurr (1981: 28) call Mansfield’s “fairly standard formula in showing a change of inner feeling brought about by an apparently trivial external event”. The apparently trivial external event is an ageing spinster’s weekly treat, a trip to the *Jardines Publiques*, where her change of feeling is brought about by a moment of realisation, after which her perception of reality will be

permanently altered. Miss Brill spends the afternoon watching the other people in park, both young and old, and imagining a sense of community with them. This assumption – and her perception of the world – is shattered when she overhears two teenagers making fun of her.

All of Miss Brill's enjoyment of her trips to the park is contained in her sense of community with the other visitors. When the band plays, she imagines that, feeling as inspired as she is by the music, everyone would start singing together: "it seemed to Miss Brill that in another moment all of them, all the whole company, would begin singing. The young ones, the laughing ones who were moving together, they would begin and the men's voices...would join them. And then she too, she too, and the others on the benches..." (MB: 271). And in this moment of shared harmony, Miss Brill thought she observed "something low, that scarcely rose or fell, something so beautiful – moving...And Miss Brill's eyes filled with tears and she looked smiling at all the other members of the company. Yes, we understand, we understand, she thought" (MB: 271). The tragedy of this supposed epiphany is soon to be revealed: the cruelty of the young lovers reveals Miss Brill's sense of community to be a false, naïve one. Like Bertha's moment in front of the pear tree in "Bliss", the moment *appears* to be one of self-awareness but will soon be revealed to be anything but that.

In terms of the six identifiable themes or techniques identified as being markers in Mansfield's writing, in "Miss Brill" Mansfield continued to explore the essential loneliness of the human condition as well to develop her use of the 'glimpse' moment as a narrative device. In "Miss Brill" she also relies heavily on carefully placed images and words to impart much of the story's otherwise unwritten meaning.

One of the story's central motifs is that of the theatre and acting, and was clearly informed by Mansfield's own interest in the performing arts, as well as in the ways that people are compelled (by choice, or by nature) to hide behind different disguises. The afternoon is described in vivid detail: Miss Brill revels in the colours, the music, the audience and the dialogues she imagines between the different characters on the 'stage'. Although Miss Brill feels part of the scene, she is also conscious of her role as a spectator as each interaction unfolds against the backdrop of the band's music. She realises this is part of why she enjoys

these visits so much: “It was like a play. It was exactly like a play...They were all on the stage. How strange that she’d never thought of it like that before!... Miss Brill smoothed the newspaper as though it were the manuscript of her part and said gently: ‘Yes, I have been an actress for a long time’” (*MB*: 271). Miss Brill’s thoughts become a reflection of Mansfield’s own ideas: in a 1921 journal entry, Mansfield mused: “So do we all begin by acting and the nearer we are to what we would be the more perfect our disguise. Finally there comes the moment where we are no longer acting” (*Letters and journals*: 243). For the time being, the experience of being part of a performance is an exciting one for Miss Brill; the underside of this, the falsity and deceit, will soon be revealed to her. She views the arrival of the young couple with theatrical embellishment: “They were beautifully dressed; they were in love. The hero and heroine, of course, just arrived from his father’s yacht” (*MB*: 271). The illusion is crushed – and the reality of her isolation revealed – when the couple banish Miss Brill from the stage with youthful impatience. As Hanson and Gurr (1981; 80) agree, in “Miss Brill” we are:

made to see the isolation of each individual within their own consciousness, and the all too common discrepancy between on the one hand the appearance which the mind creates through imagination and memory, and on the other hand reality, in the sense of what is most generally agreed to be the truth.

In “Miss Brill”, the reader – and Miss Brill herself – is presented with several pictures of the aged: the fine old man, clasping his walking stick, the big old woman, sitting upright, (“The old people sat on the bench, still as statues”) and these are juxtaposed with the vitality of the young people: “To and fro... the couples and groups paraded ...little children ran among them, swooping and laughing...”. It is clear that Miss Brill does not consider herself one of them: “there was something funny about nearly all of them. They were odd, silent, nearly all old, and from the way they stared they looked as though they’d just come from dark little rooms or even – even cupboards!” (*MB*: 269). She feels no connection to these odd, silent old people who have come from their dark, little rooms, all of whom display elements

of her own frailty that she refuses to acknowledge. As for Bertha in “Bliss”, the climax of the story – the ‘glimpse’ moment – occurs when this self-deception is shattered and self-awareness is forced roughly upon her.

Mansfield’s avoidance of elaborate or overt explanations was by now an established feature of her writing. This is especially evident in “Miss Brill” where external descriptions are used to show internal activity. Through the careful use of images and supposedly trivial details, Mansfield evokes through imagery and atmosphere, rather than explains. For example, Miss Brill observes an interaction between a gentleman and a woman wearing an ermine toque. The woman is evidently past her prime but is presented with sensitivity: rather than detailing her greying hair, she is described as “wearing the ermine toque she’d bought when her hair was still yellow” (MB: 270). It is not a successful encounter, ending with a rebuff. The woman’s disappointment is concealed, but no less apparent to the reader, beneath a too-bright smile. Similarly for Miss Brill, her disappointment after her encounter with the young lovers is not described explicitly. However, on her way home she *doesn’t* stop as usual for her almond slice, and *doesn’t* hurry home to strike the match for the kettle “in quite a dashing way”. Instead, she goes to her bed, and “sat there for a long time” (MB: 272). That such inactivity could be so eloquent!

The semi-personification of Miss Brill’s fur functions as a central image in this way. The fur, as a dead animal retaining the appearance of life, becomes a referent for Miss Brill, who feels an affinity for the dead fox: “Dear little thing! ... She had taken it out of its box that afternoon...and rubbed the life back into the dim little eyes” (MB: 268). The fur becomes an extended metaphor of Miss Brill’s own sense of and insecurities about growing old. “What has been happening to me?” said the sad little eyes... the nose wasn’t at all firm. It must have taken a knock, somehow” (MB: 268). The jeers Miss Brill overhears the teenagers making about her in the park feature as a knock to both her and her fur: the boy mutters “...that stupid old thing at the end there... Why does she come here at all – who wants her? Why doesn’t she keep her silly old mug at home?”, while the girl giggles, “It’s her fu-ur which is so funny...it’s exactly like a fried whiting” (MB: 271).

The parallel image of Miss Brill and the fur also dominates both the opening and closing paragraphs: both deal obliquely with Miss Brill's inner feelings as projected onto the fur: after her disappointment in the park, she puts the fur back in its box "quickly, without looking...but when she put the lid on she thought she heard something crying" (*MB*: 272).

If the success of the short story form can be said to rely on the accumulative impact of carefully selected and constructed words and images, Mansfield was then indeed becoming a master of the form in this regard. In "Miss Brill", she deliberately constructs each sentence, word by carefully selected word. The opening sentence – "Although it was so brilliantly fine" – is one such example: it is packed, with typical Mansfieldian clues. The observation that the day was 'brilliantly fine' is negated by the first word 'although', which immediately introduces an ominous tone. The use of the word 'brilliantly' also links to the main character and title of the story, another characteristic play with names: Miss Brill is forced, at the end of the story, to recognise that she is no longer brilliant, but beset instead with the sadness of loneliness and old age.

Mansfield threads the ominous tone insidiously through the story through insertions by the narrative voice which points towards the painful experience that is to come for Miss Brill. The image of the faint chill in the air, described in the opening paragraph, finds its echo in the description of the music, which is described as weather: "what they played was warm and sunny, yet there was just a faint chill..." (*MB*: 271). There are other such warning signs, simple images appearing in isolation from each other but feeding into a darker sub-current of menace: the little brown dog, for example, that trots off "like a little theatre dog that had been drugged" (*MB*: 270), or the beautiful woman who throws down her bunch of violets "as if they'd been poisoned" (*MB*: 270). Before Miss Brill leaves for the park, the narrator hints at the approaching glimpse moment: "And when she breathed, something light and sad – no, not sad, exactly – something gentle seemed to move in her bosom" (*MB*: 268). This sense of anticipation is not fulfilled in the way she is expecting.

It has been argued that the narrator provides descriptions of external realities only; any additional information is gleaned from weighted images or symbols. Again Mansfield

makes use of the dash or ellipsis to reveal, rather than conceal. Much of the information pertaining to Miss Brill's inner state is presented through the narrative suppressions and ellipses that pepper the text, which lend the story a delicately suggestive tone. The pause required at the dash becomes a space in which to consider what is being suppressed. For example, when Miss Brill observes that the old people look like they have come from "dark little rooms or even – even cupboards!", the pause created by the dash encourages the reader to consider the fact that both Miss Brill and her fox fur have also just come from their own cupboards. Similarly, at the end when she returns to her "little dark room – her room like a cupboard" (MB: 272) the dash becomes an admission: Miss Brill now realises that she is more like those strange, old people than she previously could admit. Other narrative suppressions are suggestive of an approaching revelation: the music contains "a faint chill – a something, what was it? – not sadness – no, not sadness – a something that made you want to sing", and then, despite the feeling of communion she has with the other visitors, "Yes, we understand, we understand – though what they understood she didn't know" (MB: 271).

"Miss Brill" can therefore be viewed as being illustrative of the refined technique and focus that Mansfield had started developing in "Prelude". These later stories reveal how, as she became less and less concerned with transparent interrogations of the modernist topics *du jour*, she moved away from textual representation of these issues towards a more metatextual representation. No less effective or innovative than her contemporaries, Mansfield was not acknowledged to be the influential talent that she in fact was.

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The Doves' Nest was published in 1923, some months after Mansfield's death, and contains the stories she wrote around the same time or shortly after the stories in *The Garden Party and Other Stories*. In a letter to her publisher in October 1921 she sketched the plan for her new volume. The plan differed from the end result for two reasons: firstly, because in the months between October 1921 and January 1922, she started and finished stories she had not foreseen (*Collected Stories*: 312). Secondly, because the collection was posthumously edited

by Murry it therefore presents a volume of six finished stories that Katherine, her own severest critic, may not herself have offered up for publication. Of the volume of notes and journals Mansfield filled in her last years, Murry also made a selection of 15 unfinished stories to be included in *The Doves' Nest* (Arkin 2006: xiv).

“A Married Man’s Story” is the longest of the unfinished stories to be included in the volume. In his introduction to the volume, Murry describes it as “long, unfinished, yet somehow complete” (*Collected Stories*: 312). Arkin (2006: xiv), in his introduction to a recent collection of Mansfield’s stories, supports the inclusion of the unfinished material as it “offers a valuable insight into her writing process and the high standards she set herself”. Although we cannot know whether Mansfield herself would have considered it worthy enough for publication, “A Married Man’s Story” is presented here as being illustrative, to some degree, of all six of the themes or devices identified in this dissertation as hallmarks of her writing. For this reason it will be the closing consideration of this dissertation. Although perhaps not her strongest story, at times marred by the moments of overstatement that appear in her younger work, “A Married Man’s Story” nevertheless reveals how Mansfield was responding to the pressures shaping the social and literary landscape around her.

Characteristically audacious in her choice of themes, in “A Married Man’s Story” Mansfield presents (sometimes with the merest of suggestion) topics such as infidelity, divorce, physical and substance abuse, violence and murder: for example, the narrator recalls his mother’s allegations before her death that she had been poisoned by her husband and how his chemist father peddled over-the-counter ‘pick-me-ups’ to young women in need. She also deals obliquely with what had become known as the Marriage Question (Hynes 1991: 185). As the narrator ponders his unhappy marriage, he considers and finds fault with the reasons that discontented couples usually give when explaining why they remain together: “for the sake of the children... the habit of years...economic reasons” (*MMS*: 355). It is almost certain that Mansfield would have been treading on sensitive territory by approaching the topic of divorce in this way. Although the Divorce Reform Act legalised divorce in 1857 (Hynes 1991: 187), the first novel in which divorce was the main theme was reportedly Arnold

Bennett's 1906 *Whom God hath joined* (Hynes 1991: 192). Hynes, citing from Philip Magnus' *King Edward the Seventh* (London: John Murray, 1964: 406) describes how in 1908 King Edward VII is reported to have commented that divorce "cannot be discussed openly and in all its aspects with any delicacy or even decency before ladies" (Hynes 1991: 186). In "A Married Man's Story", Mansfield employs the by-now familiar model: an apparently trivial external situation or event is sketched to platform an interrogation of inner feeling. It is, as the name suggests, a meditation on marriage and the family. The story takes place almost entirely in the narrator's inner consciousness as he reflects on his relationship with his wife and their current sense of estrangement from each other, and on his childhood and his relationship with his parents.

The story opens with a tranquil domestic scene, mother and child in a low chair before the fire; the husband sitting at his writing-table. He contemplates his role as a parent, and openly admits to himself that he feels no paternal connection to the child: "I can't connect him with my wife or myself" (MMS: 353). Similarly, he suspects that his wife is not the "type of woman who bears children in her own body" (MMS: 354), and believes that she probably feels more like an aunt than a mother to their child. Through her narrator's own admissions, Mansfield questions the sincerity of the prescribed roles of father/husband and mother/wife.

It is interesting to note that his attitude towards his wife is not admonitory; he admits: "How can I reasonably expect my wife, a *broken-hearted woman*, to spend her time tossing the baby?" (MMS: 354). He pictures her standing alone in the cold kitchen, absent-mindedly staring into space and he acknowledges "it is a forlorn picture. And nobody is going to come behind her to take her in his arms ... Nobody is going to call her or to wonder what she is doing out there. And she knows it" (MMS: 354). He knows his wife is unhappy. Similarly, he too dreams of escape. The initial illusion of domestic harmony is unsettled by his first imaginative flight out of the still, warm room, into the dark, rain-soaked garden, and on into a strange city where "he runs from shelter to shelter, dodging ... swerving ..." (MMS: 352). It is nothing short of an escape. One might find an echo here of Linda's escape fantasy in *The Aloe*, but it is interesting to note that the discontent and restlessness is attributed to the male

narrator, and not the disenfranchised female character as appear in her other stories. It could be argued that as Mansfield matured, and her ideas on gender roles and so-called 'feminism' became more refined, she was able to apply a more sympathetic and sensitive lens to her male characters¹⁶.

Mansfield's interest in the loneliness of the human experience, bound as it is by subjective interpretation, has thus far been shown to be a key theme in her stories. She wrote often in her journal and letters of the difficulty of really knowing another person, with the ever-shifting centre that is the modern consciousness. This interest of hers is especially evident in the stories that are constructed as interior monologues (or, in some cases, multiple interior monologues) where the gulf between what is being said and heard and what is being thought and felt is vast. The scene is once again characterised by miscommunication. Like other Mansfield characters, the narrator's wife asks: "'What are you thinking?' ... 'Nothing' I answer softly. At that she stirs ... and says 'Oh, but you must have been thinking of something!' ... 'Truly I was thinking of nothing.'" The narrator refers to these as "simple, everyday little lies" and wonders "will she never learn not to expose herself – or to build up defences?" (*MMS*: 353); such deceptions are, for him, inevitable, even necessary.

The narrator believes that despite the fact of our subjective isolation, people nevertheless become bound to one another, possibly even against their conscious will, bound by what he calls "their secret relation to each other". His theory strips the conscious individual of his or her choice regarding relationships with other people: "it is the owner, the second self inhabiting them, who makes this choice for his own particular purposes and ... it's the second self in the other which responds" (*MMS*: 355). He makes a distinction between this second self, and the self he calls "impermanent". The idea that within an individual consciousness there might exist different 'selves' has already been shown to be something that clearly interested Mansfield. In a 1919 letter she refers to "that strange sense that there is a second you who is outside yourself and does nothing – nothing but listen – the other complicated you goes on – and then there is this keen, unsleeping creature – waiting to leap –

¹⁶ She employed a male narrative voice, by this writer's count, in only five other stories.

It is like a dark beast and he who comes is its prey..." (*Letters 1*: 242). Similarly, in a journal entry she records that "I was conscious of...a huge cavern where my selves...mumbled, indifferent and intimate...and this other self in the carriage...Shall one ever be at peace with oneself?" (*Journal*: 148). This sentiment finds an echo in the narrator's "sensation of how extraordinarily *shell-like* we are as we are – little creatures, peering out of the sentry box at the gate, ogling through our glass case at the entry" (*MMS*: 355).

Not only is the narrator unable to express what he is thinking and feeling to his wife, he wrestles self-consciously with his own thoughts as he tries to articulate what he is feeling: "Tell me! Why is it so difficult to write simply – and not simply only but *sotto voce*, if you know what I mean? That is how I long to write... just the plain truth, as only a liar can tell it" (*MMS*: 357). He is alternatively pleased or dissatisfied with how he formulates his expressions: "But wait! That about the wolves won't do. Curious! Before I wrote it down, while it was still in my head, I was delighted with it. It seemed to express, and more, to suggest, just what I wanted to say. But written, I can smell the falseness immediately" (*MMS*: 356); or "Yes, perhaps that is nearer what I mean" (*MMS*: 353). The narrator's efforts to find the right word or expression find an echo in a comment made by Mansfield in a letter to Murry in 1918: "I feel I have found an approach to a story now which I must apply to everything. Is that nonsense? I read what I wrote before that last and I feel: No, this is all once *removed*: it won't do. And it won't. I've got to reconstruct everything" (*Letters 1*: 128).

The self-consciousness of the narrator is further emphasised by the frequent colloquial asides to the reader; throughout his monologue he inserts comments such as "Am I being obscure?", "Let me put it like this" and "Oh, don't misunderstand me!" (*MMS*: 355). These highlight the fourth Mansfieldian theme or narrative device to be identified here - her manipulation of the stable narrative voice. "A Married Man's Story" is, as the title suggests, the interior monologue of a male first person narrative voice. Mansfield was clearly interested in the problem of authorial voice. This method is evident in early stories like "Two tuppenny ones, please", "Late at night" and "The Black Cap". Hanson and Gurr (1981: 55) argue that

she abandoned this method but took it up again later in stories like “A Married Man’s Story”, “Bad idea” and “The Canary”.

The subjective and highly self-conscious nature of the narrator’s stream of consciousness necessarily casts doubt on his reliability as a narrator. He himself acknowledges the unreliability of his memories: “Do you remember your childhood? ... I certainly don’t. The dark stretches, the blanks, are much bigger than the bright *glimpses*” (*MMS*: 359). And “In spite of all the countless times I have recalled the circumstances, I know no more now than I did then, whether I dreamed them, or whether they really occurred” (*MMS*: 361). His retrospective on his childhood is therefore a sometimes quite incoherent patchwork of darkly evocative images and sensory perceptions. For example:

School was a tin building, struck on the raw hillside. There were dark red streaks like blood in the oozing clay banks of the playground ... And it is always cold. Big crushed-up clouds press across the sky; the rusty water in the school tank is frozen; the bell sounds numb. One day they put a dead bird in my overcoat pocket. (*MMS*: 360)

His journey into the past is also characterised by a peculiar switching of tenses: as he is pulled more and more into the vivid, chaotic jumble of his childhood memories he slips into the present tense. He describes spending time in his mother’s room: “She never left her room again...I stand beside her” (*MMS*: 358). When he tries to recount his memories of school, he again lapses into present tense: “I was small and thin...I hide in the dark passage” (*MMS*: 360). The use of the present tense has the effect of heightening the sense of confusion as the childish mind tries to make sense of his surroundings and experiences. The child’s sense of bewilderment is also evident in his description of the view of the circus posters visible from his mother’s bedroom window:

I stand beside her and we gaze at the slim lady in a red dress hitting a dark gentleman over the head with her parasol, or at the tiger peering through the jungle while the

clown, close by, balances a bottle on his nose, or at a little golden-haired girl sitting on the knee of an old black man in a broad cotton hat... She says nothing. (*MMS*: 358)

Dunbar (1997: 103) argues that “Psychology” is the only direct indication in any of Mansfield’s writing that she was aware of Freud’s work but “A Married Man’s Story” can also be said to be explicitly revealing of Mansfield’s interest in Freud and psychoanalysis. In pondering his relationship with his wife, the narrator realises that he first needs to reflect upon his past: “to explain what happened I shall have to go back and back” (*MMS*: 358) and “Why – to tell what happened last autumn – do I run all this way back into the Past? (because) they are a living part of me” and “Who am I, in fact, as I sit here at this table, but my own past?” (*MMS*: 360-1).

Mansfield once again relies on images of fire and light, and of nature to impart both meaning and atmosphere. The dim domestic scene is lit with firelight, and there is an eloquent image in the description of the mother and child “as the fire quickens, falls, flares again, her shadow – an immense *Mother and Child* – is here and gone again upon the wall” (*MMS*: 352). The image of the iconic silhouette is loudly eloquent: the narrator will shortly go on to question the sincerity of the relationship between this mother and child.

By contrast, it is cold, wet and dark outside and these descriptions enhance the narrator’s brooding thoughts. The fantasy of this outdoors flight is vivid and energetic – all the senses are activated as he describes the sounds and smells, the wetness, the running water – in contrast with the sleepy, static parlour scene. He starts moving, however, towards the admission that even such a vivid sensory experience will be marred when one “lifted the single arum lily leaf and discovered the tiny snails clinging” (*MMS*: 353). In a letter to Murry in 1919 Mansfield herself cried out against “this vileness, this snail on the underside of the leaf – always there!” (Murry, 1928a: 260), and Murry later suggests that Mansfield uses the metaphor of the snail under the leaf to express the bitterness of realising the cruelty of life (Murry 1959: 76).

Similarly, when the narrator tries to express his memory of school, he uses a few isolated images of nature and weather – crushed clouds, dead bird, frozen water tank – to convey the sense that this was not a pleasant experience for him.

More importantly, he uses the extended metaphor of a plant to describe himself: when he was born to his parents he was a “small withered bud” (*MMS*: 358), and again “I seem to have spent most of my time like a plant in a cupboard ... Pale stem...timid leaves... white reluctant bud” (*MMS*: 359-60). He goes on to describe his experience of a sense of communion with a plant outside the window after his mother’s death: “there was a creeper with small bunched-up pink and purple flowers. These did know me. These, when I touched them at night, welcomed my fingers; the little tendrils, so weak, so delicate, knew I would not hurt them” (*MMS*: 362). (The register is almost paternal, and highlights his future detachment from his wife and child. He will be unable to connect with them in this way.) The last scene in this incomplete story marks the narrator’s glimpse moment, the sixth feature of Mansfield’s writing to be discussed. Again, Mansfield chooses a moment of literal and figurative *illumination* to describe the experience. As he sits playing with the candle and the melting wax, watching the flame, he is engulfed by an “awful dreariness” that triggers the cathartic process leading to the climactic epiphany: “I saw it all...the barriers were down between us – I had come into my own world!”. He returns once more to the plant metaphor: “Then the shrivelled case of the bud split and fell, the plant in the cupboard came into flower” (*MMS*: 363).

It is not to be known how Mansfield might have altered the story had she been able to complete it. The retrospective angle of the second half of the story seems to call for a return to the present; instead the reader is left to ponder what might become of the narrator’s strained union with his wife. The important questions posed by the adult narrator in the first half of the story remain unanswered. The question on which so much of the story’s tension seems to be pivot is: “How long shall we continue to live like this?” (*MMS*: 354). It becomes the question he cannot ask his wife precisely because of its potential to elicit a second dramatic crashing down of barriers; he avoids “the famous blinding flash and deafening roar. Huge pieces of

debris are flung into the air” that such a frank conversation would elicit and admits weakly that “this will never happen; I shall never know it” (*MMS*: 354). Like other Mansfield characters, he shies away at the critical point.

*

Conclusion

It has been this dissertation’s intention to interrogate the extent of Mansfield’s reputation, and to show that, despite the literary legacy she left behind, she nevertheless remains on the periphery of the canon. It has been shown that Mansfield was marginalised for being both Other, and otherwise: not only was she a foreigner and therefore ‘unconnected’, she also flirted throughout her life with controversy, both personally and professionally. The body of work she left behind, however, reveals her to have been a profoundly modernist talent, and a selection of her stories has been examined in order to show this.

O’Connor’s suggestion that Mansfield’s work has been obscured by her legend is revealed to contain only part of the truth: it has here been argued that she has also been obscured by the legends of other writers who, like her, were working towards “obliqueness, open-endedness, discontinuous narrative, subversion of concepts of wholeness and closure, and replacement of significance with intensity” (Robinson 1994: 5). It has further been shown that these efforts, attributed to the names most frequently associated with literary modernism, Woolf, Joyce and Lawrence, were already evident in the work of earlier writers, like Mansfield, for example. Bradbury and McFarlane’s description of the modernist sentiment brewing in the years before World War One could be read as a description of Mansfield’s own writing:

...the significance of de-creating the surface of reality; intersecting historical time with time according with the movement and rhythm of the subjective mind ... the pursuit of the luminous image, or else of fictional order sustained against consecutive story; the

belief in perception as plural, life as multiple, reality as insubstantial... (Bradbury and McFarlane 1978: 50)

The temptation to speculate is inevitable: had Mansfield lived beyond 9 January 1923, when she died at the age of only 35, might her reputation have enjoyed a more entrenched status than it currently does? Might it be true that she could have become more than just “a cult, extolled for all she never lived to do” (Kenner 1988: 159) if her life and career had not been cut short? The problem of her reputation cannot however be reduced to a lack of opportunity to establish herself. The impact of her marginal position on her writing while she was alive was more than just circumstantial: it must be recognised that it was precisely Mansfield’s position on the periphery that gave her the licence and scope to challenge Establishment values and traditions. As one reviewer perceptively observed: “One thing is evident here. Miss Mansfield is not at home, not happy in this life of which she writes. She has a genius for appreciating the importance of the meaning of the little things in life, but she herself is apart from them all” (*Book Review Digest* 1926: 458). Her position in the public perception, both when she was alive and in the years after her death, could never have been anything but complex. Another reviewer described Mansfield’s writing as “polished and finished with finest, cruellest art”, saying that she was driven by a “bitterness of vision to pounce so delightedly on the ugly, the mean, the wounding, the unfaithful” (Alpers 1954: 335-6). Mansfield’s relationship with the public was therefore one of *mutual* dismay and repulsion: in a 1919 letter to Dorothy Brett, Mansfield explained “I have to keep as solitary as I can, to have nobody depending on me and to depend as little as I can...I do feel so increasingly fastidious and frightened of rudeness and roughness” (*Letters I*: 232). That some attitudes remain ambivalent is perhaps fitting for someone whose life was kept mostly apart from other people: “I feel with you that Life is ugly ...I am a writer who cares for nothing but writing...as regards myself – quite alone, quite isolated – a queer state” (*Letters I*: 221).

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